

Supervision Ethics Vignettes

Client Worsens While Under the Care of Supervisee

A 16-year-old girl who came to counseling for help with recurrent depression is exhibiting increasingly severe episodes of self-mutilation. The supervisee is very worried and afraid to tell his supervisor about the extent of her self-injury for fear that it will result in a poor evaluation. Eight sessions of counseling have been completed. The client has made vague references to childhood sexual abuse, but to date nothing specific has been addressed in therapy. The supervisee is reluctant to discuss the matter with his client because he is afraid she will become suicidal. The supervisee has not told his supervisor the self-mutilation has worsened.

Should the supervisee keep this information from his supervisor?

Is this client at risk for suicide?

Is this case beyond the expertise of the supervisee?

What might be causing the supervisee's lack of disclosure?

How can the supervisor monitor the client's welfare?

Angry Client Wants to End Counseling with Supervisee

A 42-year-old male client is seeking counseling for help with his struggling marriage. He has had repeated affairs but states his interest in wanting to cease his infidelity and recommit to his marriage. He is very nervous about the privacy of his disclosures but is reassured by the supervisee that all of his disclosures are confidential and will not be released to anyone without his written consent. A few weeks into therapy the client becomes very angry after the supervisee tells him he has been talking with his supervisors, Dr. Ellen Smith, about the case and has a good idea how to help him. Unknown to the supervisee, Dr. Ellen Smith is a good friend of the client's wife. The client, now realizing that his counselor's supervisor was Dr. Ellen Smith, becomes very angry and afraid that all he has disclosed will find its way back to his wife. He wants to immediately end therapy with the supervisee.

Did the supervisee sufficiently disclose the limits of confidentiality?

Does the client have a right to be angry with the counselor?

Is there risk that this counselor could be sued and/or a complaint brought against the counselor, supervisor, and agency?

How can the counselor and supervisor best handle this situation?

What supervisee and supervisor actions could have presented this problem?

Pressure from the Agency to Supervise the New Counseling Intern

A highly skilled, experienced, and licensed professional counselor has been asked by his agency to supervise the new counseling intern from the local University counseling program. None of the other senior agency clinicians are interested in taking on this responsibility, but don't want to lose the opportunity afforded them in having the intern help them with the agency's waiting list. The agency director makes a personal appeal to a junior staff person to take on this obligation. Although reluctant and unsure how to provide adequate supervision, the junior staff person accepts the request and agrees to supervise the intern. The two met on a regular basis, review ongoing cases, clear the agency's waiting list, and generally fulfill the intern's academic requirements.

Is it appropriate for interns to be used to clear an agency's waiting list?

Does the junior staff person have sufficient experience to supervise the intern?

Will the intern receive a good experience at this agency?

Will the clients seen by this intern receive good therapy?

What special qualifications and training does the junior staff person have to provide the intern with a good supervised experience?

A Close Friend and Colleague Wants You to Supervise Him

A highly trained and well-respected clinical supervisor, with years of supervisory experience, who has helped many students and professionals fulfill their clinical supervision requirements for their respective professional certification and licensure, has been asked by his friend and colleague to supervise him. It seems that the colleague's graduate counseling education program has now required all faculty to become licensed, and this will require 2 hours of clinical supervision. The supervisor, not wanting to disappoint his friend and confident he can help him, agrees to conduct the supervision. All goes well at first, but as the supervision continues, the supervisor becomes aware of some significant weaknesses in his colleague's approach. He attempts to address these directly with him, but his friend becomes defensive. The supervisor decides to back off. He does not want to hurt their relationship, but the weaknesses become more obvious. The supervisor feels a professional obligation to address it again and attempts to do so. This time his friend becomes angry and demands to terminate supervision. The supervisor, now frustrated and disappointed, agrees that termination maybe the best solution. For months thereafter, despite continued efforts by the supervisor to reconnect with his friend, his friend keeps his distance. The supervisor fears the relationship maybe forever damaged and remains concerned that his friend has not addressed his weaknesses.

Is it appropriate for a friend and colleague to request supervision from a friend and colleague?

How should the supervisor have responded to the request?

How could the supervisor best deliver the feedback to his friend?

Is termination of the supervisory relationship an appropriate option?

What should the supervisor do with his disappointment and continued concern?

A Supervisee's Parent Unexpectedly Dies

A supervisor and supervisee have been meeting for supervision for well over 9 months. During that time the supervisee shared that her mother was ill with cancer. It had been a difficult ordeal for her and a frequent topic in her supervision. The supervisee worked with two clients, who were dealing with loss issues, and it was important for her to understand how her own issues were influencing her therapy. Then the personal news came. Her mother had died. The supervisee was very upset and in tears as she informed her supervisor of the news. During their conversation, she asked her supervisor to help her get through the visitation and funeral. The supervisor politely said she could not do so as it would be a breach of supervision ethics for her to have a nonprofessional relationship with her supervisee. The supervisor offered her condolences and scheduled the next supervision session.

Was the topic of her mother's struggle with cancer appropriate content for supervision?

Should the supervisee continue to see clients who are also dealing with loss?

Did the supervisor act ethically in declining the supervisee's request to help her get through the visitation and funeral?

How else could the supervisor have addressed the supervisee's request?

What personal feelings might the supervisor be reacting to in declining the supervisee's request?

Supervisee On-the-Job Training

A new practicum student received his placement site notice. He was very excited about the prospect of working at one of the leading private practices in town. His initial interview went very well, and the staff at the private practice offered him the position. The first day on the job, he had four clients to see. He dove right in, did his case notes, and submitted the payment for the sessions to the appropriate office staff. Then his troubles began. He was told he didn't have the clients fill out the correct forms. He didn't properly schedule the next appointments. He failed to collect the right co-pays and deductibles. And worst of all, he didn't inform his clients he was a practicum student and didn't have them sign the appropriate release forms so that a senior staff therapist could supervise his work with them. His first day on the job was a disaster.

Who is responsible for these problems, the supervisee or supervisor?

What kind of consequence should the supervisee receive?

How can the problem be remedied?

What if a client now objects to seeing a practicum student?

What else does the supervisee need to know?

Off on the Wrong Foot and Only Getting Worse

An independent practicing master's level therapist decided she could benefit from ongoing clinical supervision. She developed a list of area practitioners who she felt she could work well with and began the process of interviewing each of them. She hoped to find a highly experienced female clinician with Jungian training. However, after speaking with several

prospective supervisors, she couldn't find exactly what she wanted. After some reflection, she decided to contract with a male supervisor who had a psychodynamic orientation. He said he was familiar with Jungian principles and more importantly had provided clinical supervision for over 10 years. Their first supervision session was scheduled for 2 weeks later. The supervisee arrived on time, but had to wait 20 minutes before her supervisor finished his last client. The session opened with the supervisor talking about himself, his experience, and his last counseling session. By the time he finished, the hour was over and the supervisee was not able to share anything about her needs and expectations, nor was she able to present a case for feedback. The Counselor left the first session worried she had made a mistake in selecting this supervisor but decided to give him another try. As with the previous session, the supervisor was again late. This time he did ask her whether she had a case to present, and she offered a concise client history, diagnostic impression, and questions for supervision. The supervisor listened attentively and then offered his analysis from a psychodynamic, object-relations perspective. The supervisee responded with a puzzled look on her face. She asked, "What symbolism do you think might be represented in the client's dream about an old, gray-haired woman?" The supervisor shrugged his shoulders and asked the supervisee questions about the client's attachment to his mother. The supervisee said nothing. The supervisor then began to postulate about the possible implications of the client's early attachment on his current problems with anxiety. The supervisee respectfully listened but thought, "I've made a terrible mistake in choosing this supervisor. Now what do I do?" Out of courtesy and perhaps avoidance, she agreed to schedule another supervision session, but didn't show up. Instead, she wrote the supervisor a letter stating her decision to discontinue their supervision. She explained she really preferred a female supervisor and thanked him for his time.

How specific should a supervisee be in the selection of a supervisor?

What is the supervisor's responsibility in ensuring a good supervisee-supervisor match?

If problems occur, how should they be addressed?

Did the supervisor have a fair opportunity to adjust his approach?

Should the supervisee have terminated supervision in the manner she did?

You Can't Change What You're Not Aware of

A newly graduated master's degree therapist took a job with an area agency. The therapist arrived with strong recommendations from his graduate program and even stronger recommendations from his internship supervisor. He was given an adequate orientation to his new job and was informed about the performance evaluation process. As the weeks turned into months, the therapist thought he was doing well. Yes, he had made a few mistakes, but these were caught and corrected. Overall, he had the impression all was going well. Then, near the end of his 6-month review period, he was unexpectedly fired. The reasons given were well beyond the mistakes that were previously brought to his attention. They included concern about his attitude, clinical judgment, over ethical decision making. He was shocked and hurt. He had met frequently with his clinical supervisor, but none of these issues were ever brought up. He felt betrayed and angry.

Is it realistic to expect a new professional to make some mistakes?

Should a counselor be informed of all his shortcomings?

Is it the supervisor's responsibility to outline corrective action?

Is it legal for an employer to terminate an employee without disclosure of cause?

It is ethical for supervisor to dismiss a counselor without feedback or without referral for reparative measures?

Counselor Heal Thyself

A graduate professor in a master's degree counseling program supervised several students. She also offered supervision services to community mental health professionals. At times in the course of supervision, she became aware of supervisees' unresolved personal matters that seemed to be negatively affecting their clinical work with clients. When this happened with a student, she helped him or her understand the problem and referred the student for personal counseling. She did not want a dual teaching and professional therapy relationship with a student. When this occurred with a community mental health professional, however, she offered the supervisee the opportunity in supervision to work on his or her personal issues. She felt that because she and her professional supervisee already had good rapport and an established financial arrangement, it wasn't much of a stretch to provide both personal counseling and supervision. In addition, her supervision clients seemed to appreciate the convenience of doing both under one roof. All seemed to work well until one case presented a dilemma that neither the supervisee nor supervisor saw coming.

A nonstudent supervisee was working with an older couple and having some difficulty helping them disengage from constant verbal conflict. He tried many different approaches, several suggested by his supervisor, but none were effective. The couple was drifting closer and closer to divorce. The supervisee was very upset by his inability to help this couple. The supervisor recognized this and explored with the counselor why he was so reluctant to accept that perhaps this couple did not want to improve their relationship. During the exploration, the supervisee disclosed that he too was struggling with his marriage. His wife wanted out, whereas he wanted to work on it. The supervisor suggested that this might be the reason it was so difficult for him to accept that his clients might choose to divorce. As they spoke, the supervisee broke into tears and asked his supervisor if she could provide counseling for his wife and him.

The supervisor agreed. They met as a couple for several sessions. Little progress was made. The supervisee's wife still wanted out, and the supervisee didn't want to accept it. As his supervisor tried to help him come to accept that his marriage was ending, the supervisee became very angry and blamed his supervisor for not trying hard enough. The supervisor apologized for being unable to help his supervisee save his marriage, but this didn't stop the supervisee from losing trust and respect for his supervisor. Their supervision was never the same.

Is it reasonable to have one policy about providing counseling to student supervisees and another for private pay supervisees?

Did the supervisee really need counseling?

Are rapport and convenience the only factors to consider in agreeing to counsel a supervisee?

How could this supervisor and supervisee salvage their supervision relationship?

Why should this supervisor never have agreed to counsel his supervisee?