



## Beginning with the end in mind: Precommitment considerations for the supervisory relationship

The termination of supervisory relationships is among the most frequent inquiries to the ethics consultants at the American Counseling Association's Center for Policy, Practice and Research. As professionals enter into supervisory relationships with new graduates who are practicing under supervision, it is imperative that they construct a framework for the working agreement recognizing that the relationship might need to be terminated for some reason.

It is important for supervisors to clearly articulate and delineate their rules and expectations for this new therapeutic alliance. Although it is usually optimal to co-construct goals for supervision, most supervisors have some nonnegotiables. As Terry Kottman would say in play therapy, "What are your rules, and have you communicated your rules?"

All good relationships begin with informed consent and clearly defined expectations. It is advisable to cover these elements both in conversation and through the use of a supervisory contract. Once the contract is written, it is recommended to seek consultation on the contract both from an attorney and from members of the counseling profession. Attorneys will have a keen legal eye for potential litigation and legal problems, whereas individuals of trust in the profession will possess the perspective of best practice and the *ACA Code of Ethics*.

The contract is a good place to clearly identify both the supervisor's and the supervisee's responsibilities and to clarify logistics and boundaries. We offer areas to consider in the following sections.

### The nature of the relationship

Because of the familiar nature of the supervisory relationship, it is very easy for

new professionals to mistake this working dynamic for a friendship, a parental role or purely mentorship. Although a healthy supervisory relationship might contain elements of these roles, it is imperative to define the professional boundaries of the relationship, including the necessity of gatekeeping.

It is important to identify the boundaries outlined by the *ACA Code of Ethics*, and it is also prudent to identify the boundaries that are vital for a working relationship. Some supervisors are comfortable offering 24/7 access and expect to be contacted in the event of an emergency (after all, supervisees are working under the supervisor's license). Other supervisors want to preserve their family time or client time, and they want to be contacted by their supervisees only during established supervision time. This is a significant conversation to have at the beginning of the relationship.

During the course of the supervisory relationship, personal issues are likely to surface, and it is normal for supervisors to help supervisees process how those issues might be affecting their ability to provide services. A point may arrive, however, when the supervisor realizes that the supervisee needs additional personal counseling. This is an important factor to consider and communicate *prior* to the supervisory relationship beginning.

### The clinical site

Some supervisors work in the same clinical location as their supervisees, whereas others may have had no prior contact with a supervisee's site. This is a noteworthy variable to deliberate in the beginning of a supervisory relationship. The supervisor might consider having an additional memorandum of agreement with the site that outlines the

relationship between the supervisor and the site. This would become especially important if a lawsuit or any allegations of misconduct were to surface. In most situations, relationships with off-site supervision can be amicable — until they are not, so it is imperative to be prepared.

Also essential to consider are the varying supervision methods that might be used — video, case conceptualizations, co-therapy, live supervision, observation, bug-in-the-ear technology, etc. — and whether there is appropriate permission in place from the counseling site.

### Theoretical orientation and scope of practice

Just as is the case when it comes to counseling clients, each supervisor will have a theoretical orientation and a scope of practice. In an age when most counselors identify with some degree of eclecticism, it is important for supervisors to identify what theoretical principles best identify their core beliefs about clients, the therapeutic process and the nature of change. Supervisors must be forthcoming about their areas of competence and not supervise beyond their scope of expertise. The better the supervisor's strengths are matched with the supervisee's needs, the more harmonious the supervisory alliance will be.

### Expect the unexpected

Supervisors must anticipate the unexpected. Creating processes for supervisor or supervisee incapacitation can help to alleviate stress during crises. It is impossible to anticipate every situation, but it is feasible to think about who might be asked to step in if the supervisor is ill or unavailable for some other unforeseen reason. Supervisors can typically plan ahead for vacation travel

and for familial obligations such as the birth of a child.

As for worst-case scenarios, it is also important to ensure that liability insurance will provide the appropriate coverage. Some liability insurance covers activities that fall under the supervisor's clinical license, but it might not cover teaching or supervision. Some policies require a rider for teaching and supervision. Ask the liability insurance provider about the limits of coverage before a report has to be made.

Additionally, it is essential to identify expectations for communication between the supervisor and the supervisee in the event of an emergency or an allegation.

### **Logistics**

Many of the problems that cause irritation in the supervisory alliance are logistical in nature. It is important to clearly identify logistical considerations and personal expectations. For example, many supervisors can be frustrated by breaches of protocol that appear to them to be common sense when, in truth, they were never communicated at the beginning of the relationship. The following are examples of logistical items that should be discussed ahead of time.

#### ***Where will supervision take place?***

It might be tempting to do supervision over a meal or a drink, but it is important for the supervisor to consider the message the venue conveys. For example, if the venue conveys a spirit of informality, the nonverbal cues might be confusing for new professionals and might encourage an assumption of greater freedom than intended.

#### ***Does this venue protect client confidentiality?***

Supervision should be conducted in a location that is professional and that protects the confidentiality of the clients being discussed. Confidentiality can be breached in many small ways. Instances of individuals overhearing conversations in public places or overhearing portions of phone consultations are easily remedied with preplanning.

***Is this a clinical space?*** Supervisors should ensure they have made it clear to supervisees that clients can be discussed only in appropriate clinical spaces. It also helps to define the concept of *clinical space*. We define it as a room with a closed

door and an activated sound machine. This allows for the creation of makeshift clinical spaces when necessary.

### **Changes in schedule**

What will happen when the supervisor or supervisee misses or must reschedule a supervisory session? Many supervisors have a policy concerning no-shows or the ability to reschedule. When supervisors have full caseloads, the logistics involving missed supervisory sessions can be difficult. Additional difficulties arise when policies governing the rescheduling of supervisee appointments are created out of fatigue or irritation. This process should be considered ahead of time and outlined clearly for supervisees.

It is equally important to outline the process for rescheduling due to the supervisor's schedule. Considerations for the ramifications on supervisees' ability to count hours should be considered. In some agencies, supervisees cannot count hours if they miss supervision, even if it was the supervisor who rescheduled the session.

### **Supervision fees**

There is tremendous discussion surrounding payment for supervision services. This can be a financial hardship for new professionals who are just getting started in the field. Therefore, it is imperative that supervisors clearly identify the costs involved in supervision upfront and in detail. The cost of supervision, the payment schedule expected, the method of payment (for example, does the supervisor accept only checks?) and the frequency of supervisory appointments are all considerations to discuss when addressing remuneration.

Another potential point of contention can be the type of supervision agreed to and provided. For example, if a supervisee contracts for individual supervision at a designated rate, does that rate change if triadic supervision is conducted in its place one week? Does the number of clients on a supervisee's caseload influence this decision? The type of supervision should be agreed to beforehand and carried out as planned throughout the supervisory relationship unless a change to the arrangement is mutually discussed and agreed to. A plan identifying the consequences for nonpayment of supervisory services

is also important to discuss prior to entering into this relationship.

### **Use of technology**

Many new professionals entering the counseling profession are digital natives. For them, technology is a ubiquitous consumable akin to telephones and toilet paper. Thus, it is important for supervisors to identify expectations for the use of technology. It is even more crucial for this conversation to occur when distance counseling and supervision are being utilized. Supervisors should discuss expectations for the use of technology as it relates to both the supervisor-supervisee relationship and the client-counselor relationship.

Phone consultation policies and the appropriate use of text messaging are important variables to discuss. Some supervisors want to receive texts from their supervisees only if the texts concern logistical situations (for example, "Running late" or "Call me when you get a chance"). Others have a strict "no texts" policy. It is important to be aware of the records laws for the state of practice because text messages are something that become a part of official clinical notes. It is vital to avoid having entire conversations with supervisees via text message or allowing supervisees to have entire conversations with clients via text message because this communication might be subjected to the legal definition of clinical notes.

Finally, it is important to identify how communication should be conducted appropriately via email or voicemail. Some clinicians and supervisors are tied to email, and it is a way for them to send information in real time; however, others check email only periodically. This is a crucial clarification to make in the beginning of the supervisory relationship, especially for situations in which time is scarce.

Several states have allowed for supervision via synchronous technology. When the supervisory relationship is using such technologies, it is necessary to consider a few additional variables. For instance, what is the appropriate platform that can be used to connect for supervision? When connecting to the internet, is it most appropriate to use a wired line, or have efforts been made to

secure Wi-Fi? These are also considerations when supervising distance counseling.

Some counselors and supervisors use social media for personal or professional reasons. Disastrous consequences can occur when the personal and professional collide, however. It is important for supervisors to communicate the appropriate use of social media with and by supervisees. For example, if the supervisor considers advertising via Facebook to be a risky behavior, this should be noted. How will supervisees handle friend requests? In anticipating the potential impact of a digital footprint, remain familiar with the best practices and ethics surrounding social media, and clearly define all expectations with supervisees.

### Goals, instructions and evaluations

A frequent complaint from supervisees is that they did not receive feedback from their supervisors prior to an issue being recognized. It is important that supervisors clearly identify the methods and frequency of official feedback, in addition to ongoing evaluation, with their supervisees.

This can be a part of the process by which supervisors co-construct goals with their supervisees. It can include video reviews, written evaluations and reports, and weekly supervision. In the event of an incident, supervisors might be held responsible for identifying and producing the official feedback offered to those under their supervision.

### Supervision records

Supervisors should be aware of the regulations in their states regarding supervisory records. These records might include the following (in addition to any other information that state boards, statutes or administrative regulations have identified):

- ❖ Fees and records of payment
- ❖ Dates, length and time of supervisory sessions
- ❖ Topics during each supervisory session
- ❖ Type of session and who was in attendance (individual, triadic or group supervision)
- ❖ Method of connection for supervision (live/in-person or via webcam and computer)

- ❖ Record of any concerns the supervisor discussed with the supervisee
- ❖ Identification of the site where the supervisee is seeing clients or accruing hours
- ❖ Number of clients on the supervisee's caseload
- ❖ Danger or crisis that needs to be monitored
- ❖ Signed logs, including indirect, direct and supervision hours (Logs should be signed and dated each week by both the supervisee and supervisor.)

### Process for terminating

In the event that a supervisee must be terminated, it is important to use a deliberate and documented process, much like the steps in a counseling ethical decision-making model. Make sure that documentation and communication are ongoing processes throughout the supervisory relationship, especially when supervisees are noncompliant with supervisor instructions or have engaged in risky or harmful behavior.

If termination is inevitable, think ahead about the most effective way to communicate with the supervisee. It might be necessary to conduct the communication both in person and in writing for documentation purposes. When possible, it is important to attempt to "bridge" supervision to avoid a gap in services or supervision. It is also crucial to be aware of what the state licensure board considers to be an official form of communication. Some boards identify certified mail with receipt as the only official method for communicating. Create a paper trail so that documentation procedures can be demonstrated.

When considering the possibility of terminating a supervisory relationship, consultation circles can be a valuable resource. These trusted professionals can help identify ethical questions that might not have been considered yet. Additionally, it is prudent to communicate with the liability insurance risk management consultant and an attorney when situations are strained or when circumstances are present that might end in a legal proceeding. The ethics consultants on staff at ACA can also provide valuable guidance in many situations.

### Conclusion

Counseling supervisors begin supervisory relationships with the hope that all of their supervisees will transition successfully into independent counselors. Professionals must begin with the end in mind, however. When supervisors clearly outline their expectations, supervisees will be better prepared for success.

When constructing a professional supervisory plan, consult the *ACA Code of Ethics* and attend specifically to sections F (Supervision, Training and Teaching) and H (Distance Counseling, Technology and Social Media). ❖

Jennifer Nivin Williamson, a former senior co-chair of the ACA Ethics Committee, is a professor of graduate counseling and an ethics subject matter expert in the My Way program at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. She is a licensed professional counselor in Texas, a licensed professional clinical counselor supervisor in Kentucky and a national certified counselor. A Fulbright specialist alumna in mental health, she has presented nationally and internationally on counselor ethics.

Daniel Williamson, immediate past co-chair of the ACA Policies and Bylaws Committee, is department chair and professor of graduate counseling at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. He is a licensed professional counselor in Texas, a licensed professional clinical counselor supervisor in Kentucky and a national certified counselor. A Fulbright specialist alumnus in mental health, he has presented nationally and internationally on counselor ethics.

Letters to the editor:  
[ct@counseling.org](mailto:ct@counseling.org)