Supporting individuals, teams and organisations

Tool: Supervision for social work in disasters

Author Deirdre Ford

With the potential for supervisors and supervisees themselves to contract the virus, the trauma of Covid-19 raises complex issues for supervision. This tool is underscored by Trauma Informed Practice (TIP). TIP emphasises how important it is for social work supervisors to develop a thorough understanding of trauma, both to appreciate the responses of supervisees to Covid-19 and to help them better understand the impact of the pandemic on adults needing social care. The following is a reminder:

Disaster

> Covid-19 is a **natural disaster**, 'a serious disruption of the functioning of a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected society to cope using its own resources. (UNISDR, 2009)

> The scale of the disaster, its intensity, pre-existing strengths and vulnerabilities of those affected are all factors which determine its impact (Adamson, 2018)

> **Disaster capitalism:** the political strategy of seizing upon large-scale crises to drive through policies that deepen inequality (Klein, 2007). Trauma is undoubtedly socio-political and economic, as well as interpersonal, exposing and exacerbating social injustice.

> **Intersectionality:** an analysis of how different forms of oppression (such as ageism, racism etc.) interact and intersect with structural and environmental conditions to influence lived experience. Current debates about Covid-19 and eligibility for treatment exemplify concerns. **https://socialworkwithadults.blog.gov.uk/2020/01/31/why-intersectionality-matters-for-social-work-practice-in-adult-services/**

> Research in Practice has published a **research summary** 'Social work in extremis: A COVID-19 edition' **https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/content-pages/research-summaries/research-summary-april-2020/**

Crisis theory and crisis intervention

> **Crisis response:** a reaction to a stressful experience that affects the stability of a person to such an extent that their ability to cope or function is seriously compromised. Crisis is a subjective term used loosely to describe a range of feelings such as panic, chaos, stress. Stress in itself may not represent crisis; much depends on how the person themselves feels about the situation, and how they cope. Past events and previous coping strategies are highly significant (Stepney & Ford, 2012).

> **Crisis / Disaster – stages and responses:**
>   1. Impact- Heroic: altruistic behaviour helping others
>   2. Rescue - Honeymoon phase: acute awareness of survival; support from emergency services available
>   3. Recovery – Disillusionment: anger and loss experienced, sense of community declines, services withdraw, blaming and scapegoating represent attempts to regain control
>   4. Longer-term Recovery - Reconstruction, integrative phase: survivors rebuild their lives and reaffirm their faith in coping strategies.

> **Crisis as opportunity** – for post-traumatic personal and professional growth. Using a strengths approach, supervisors can help supervisees foster their sense of agency and self-efficacy, knowledge and skills.

4x4x4 model of supervision (Morrison, 2005)

Trauma-informed practice (TIP)

> **TIP:** a strengths approach based on an understanding of, and responsiveness to the impact of trauma.

> **Supervisees themselves may experience indirect trauma:**
> 1. **secondary trauma**: symptoms might include hypervigilance, preoccupation with trauma experienced by service users, recollections and dreams, leading to denial and emotional detachment
> 2. **vicarious trauma**: sometimes used to denote secondary trauma, but specifically it refers to changes in cognitive schema and distorted thinking associated with suspicion, pessimism, and feelings of powerlessness
> 3. **compassion fatigue**: bearing witness to people's stories and their distress over time might lead to an inability to empathise with people
>
> <div align="right">(Knight, 2018:12)</div>

> **5 principles of TIP applied to supervision**:
> 1. **Safety:** create a physically and emotionally safe space. Help supervisees to understand and contain their reactions to their work; minimise its impact by respecting and validating their experiences and promoting self-care.
>
> 2. **Trust:** recognise that trust and safety are interdependent. Maintain clear boundaries, protect confidentiality and interact with the supervisee in ways that are consistent, predictable, and transparent. Cultural competence is important in understanding how reactions to trauma are culturally determined (Harris and Fallot, 2001).
>
> 3. **Choice:** help the supervisee to regain a sense of control
>
> 4. **Collaboration:** a supervisory relationship where the supervisor's knowledge and wisdom are not privileged over those of the supervisee - each learns from the other's experience
>
> 5. **Empowerment:** encourage self-reflection and learning. Coproduction - ask the supervisee to identify and celebrate their successes as well as challenges.

(Harris and Fallot, 2001; Berger & Quiros, 2014; Knight, 2018)

Supervision's protective factors

> Discuss strategies to separate work from personal life – taking breaks, using personal journals at work to process feelings, not taking work home. Check strategies for self-care; help the supervisee to audit and mobilise their own social networks including faith-based communities (Adamson, 2018; Knight, 2018; Tavistock & Portman, 2020).

Trauma and workload management

> Encourage skills in managing workload, pacing and sequencing work with service users especially in situations that are more challenging. Refrain from 'crowding' too many online meetings on one day if possible.

> **A 3-stage model**
> '...work toward the acceptance of those things over which the supervisee has no control, and assistance in consolidating a sense of agency and hope'
> 1. assist supervisees in identifying the personal impact on themselves - 'What are you experiencing right now?'
> 2. separation of the things that are theirs to work on from the things that cannot be resolved by their own (or their allies') actions - 'What control do you have over this? Who will assist in finding those necessary resources?'
> 3. a re-integration process that may involve planning courses of action for changes that can be achieved - 'What steps are you going to take before our next meeting?'
> (Adamson, 2018:235)

> **See also Allyson Davys (2020) *Supervision in a Time of Crisis: Covid-19* Aotearoa New Zealand**

As noted previously, encouraging self-belief and self-efficacy of practitioners is a crucial task for supervisors so a final word from Kate Barlow:

'However, something amazing has happened in the past few months with people clapping to celebrate the work we do. Families that would usually be upset by a call from a social worker are now grateful to hear the voice of someone that can help. The public and services are contacting us to ask what they can do to help.

As a result of more positive press coverage, more people are phoning to ask for help without fear of judgment. This has made is easier to protect our vulnerable citizens and has helped me to remember why I wanted to be a social worker in the first place - to help others'.
www.basw.co.uk/resources/psw-magazine/psw-online/press-and-public-are-finally-seeing-what-our-everyday-crisis-looks

References

Adamson, C. (2018) Trauma-informed supervision in the disaster context. *The Clinical Supervisor* 37(1) 221-240

Berger, R. & Quiros, L. (2014) Supervision for Trauma-Informed Practice. *Traumatology* 20(4) 296-301

Harris, M. & Fallot, R. (2001) *Using trauma theory to design service systems: New directions for mental health services.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass

Klein, N. (2007) The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism. London: Penguin

Knight, C. (2018) Trauma-informed supervision: Historical antecedents, current practice, and future directions. *The Clinical Supervisor* 37(1) 7-37

Morrison, T. (2005) *Staff Supervision in Social Care.* Brighton: Pavilion

Stepney, P. and Ford, D. (eds.) (2012) *Social Work Models, Methods and Theories* (2e). Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (2020) *COVID-19 Guidance for the Support and Wellbeing of Adult Social Workers and Social Care Professionals in a Pandemic Crisis*
www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Documents/Learning-and-development/social-work/psw/COVID-19-Guidance-for-Adult-Social-Care-Professionals-CSW.pdf

UNISDR (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction) (2009). *Terminology.*
www.unisdr.org/we/inform/terminology