

Supporting individuals, teams and organisations

Supervision conversations using remote-working technology

The Covid-19 pandemic, and consequent need for social distancing, have required a reorganisation of every aspect of adult social care practice, including supervision.

Remote supervision offers the opportunity to support workers and trainees in these difficult and challenging circumstances. It can offer a place for personal as well as professional support to colleagues, peers and returning practitioners - a place to share strengths and successes as well as challenges. Supervision conversations which take place online can be emotionally literate and relationship based, modelling sensitive and attuned communication.

Many supervisees will be experiencing grief and loss, for example, of their previous lifestyle and social contact, for some bereavement following the death of a loved one or colleague from Covid-19, as well as being concerned about the risks to their own health and the wellbeing of their loved ones, many with added pressures of home-educating children. In this context, there is a clear duty of care upon the employers of adult social care staff to recognise and attend to these risks to the workforce.

Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust offer this reassurance to their remote-working staff:

Working remotely - COVID 19 principles

- 1 You are not “Working from Home”, you are “At your home, during a crisis, trying to work”.**
- 2 Your personal physical, mental, and emotional health is far more important than anything else right now.**
- 3 You should not try to compensate for lost productivity by working longer hours.**
- 4 You will be kind to yourself and not judge how you are coping based on how you see others coping.**
- 5 You will be kind to others and not judge how they are coping based on how you are coping.**
- 6 Your team’s success will not be measured the same way it was when things were normal.**

Reflecting on current lived experience of social work practice supervision during the pandemic, Sally Nieman and Shabnam Ahmed in their podcast [Virtual supervision: A supervisor's perspective](#) explore what supervision is like during COVID-19 from the perspective of a manager supervising social care practitioners. Shabnam considers some of the challenges, what is working well, and what is important about supervision at this time, referring to the [4 x 4 x 4 model](#) and the ['Feelings wheel' tool](#), as well as other discoveries and useful tips.

Alison Domakin's blog [Supporting Remote And Online Supervision During Covid-19](#) offers a useful summary of issues and range of strategies for on-screen supervision.

Dr Karen Treisman's recorded webinar [Bereavement and loss during COVID-19: What does good organisational practice and staff support look like?](#) provides a wealth of practice tips and techniques.

Telephone and other auditory technology systems such as podcasts, radio broadcasts (for example, the critical analysis of statistical information on Radio 4's 'More or Less') and Relaxation Apps are equally valuable alongside visual online support systems, for example, video-recordings of group supervision and team discussions.

The recorded [example of telephone supervision using the values and ethics tool](#)

Example of [video group supervision using the debrief tool](#)

The [videos section of the SDP website](#) provides six snapshots of practice supervision each exploring a different style or aspect of the supervisory relationship.

Be bold, be creative, work collaboratively with your supervisees, and seek feedback, and you will find ways of making remote supervision meaningful.

Evidence and knowledge base

Deirdre Ford's blog [Supervision for Social Work in Disaster](#) reminds us of the stages of disaster management, which help to inform prioritisation over time. The value of supervision during a crisis is central, drawing from crisis theory, crisis intervention and trauma-informed practice.

There is a small and emerging evidence base regarding remote supervision:

One study in rural Australia concluded that remote supervision was effective, especially when no other options were available due to geographical constraints (Nancarrow et al, 2014).

Martin et al (2017) conclude that remote supervision has the potential to achieve the same benefits as face to face supervision. This piece aims to offer some ideas and support to supervisors who are making the leap to offering supervision remotely.

Most of us are used to experiencing supervision as a conversation between two or more people, sitting in the same room, working together to create a protected space for critical reflection and analysis. Currently, supervision conversations are more likely to be taking place between people who are sitting in different locations, connected via the internet or a phone line.

These adaptations are taking place during the wider context of a global pandemic, which is impacting every aspect of the nature of our work. This context makes it even more important that workers are supported through safe and containing supervision conversations.

A recent study of the wellbeing of Chinese healthcare workers identified that those working with patients who were diagnosed with COVID-19 were at an increased risk of experiencing anxiety, depression and distress (Lai et al, 2020).

Social care workers may well be experiencing moral distress, arising from their inability to maintain the standards of care and support which they would aspire to offer under more usual circumstances, prior to the Coronavirus Act 2020 and Care Act easements .

Katy Shorten provides a useful summary of legislative changes and the new ethical framework in her blog: [Responding To Covid-19: The Ethical Framework For Adult Social Care](#)

Top Tips: Remote and online supervision

1. The technical aspects

- > There is a wide selection of different communication platforms available; Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, Skype, WhatsApp and Zoom are some of the most commonly used. Every agency is likely to have a policy regarding which platform to use, including guidance regarding confidentiality and data security. No platform is 100% risk free; however, not offering supervision also incurs risks, so use agency policies in order to arrive at a sensible balance.
- > If you are using anything other than the telephone, you are likely to want to maximise the strength and reliability of your internet connection. If possible, it is best to use an ethernet connection, which plugs in directly to your computer. If this is not possible, use a location in your home which has the best possible internet connection, and close down additional tabs and applications on your computer.
- > If you are using an online platform which is new to you, then make sure to test it by calling a colleague or friend, so that you can experiment with the different functions before you use it to make your first supervision call. There are plenty of tutorials available for each different platform on internet sites such as YouTube. You can familiarise yourself with how to turn on the audio and video functions, how to mute them, how to begin and end calls, and how to share your screen, where possible.
- > You will also need to agree a procedure for coping if your internet connection fails, or if the call freezes. For example, who will be responsible for attempting to regain the connection? What alternative contact details do you have for each other? What back up plans might you need? It can also be sensible to agree a policy in relation to the recording of sessions or the taking of screen shots, as these functions are available on many of the internet platforms.

2. Settle yourself, and check in with your feelings

Offering supervision online may not have been something you would have chosen to do. Your responses to it may be influenced by pre-existing attitudes to technology and digital communication.

- > *Are you a person who is comfortable in the online world, and used to navigating different communication platforms, or is this a more unfamiliar way of communicating for you?*

Whatever your personal comfort level with remote communication, it is worth remembering that supervision offered online is likely to lead to better outcomes for staff and therefore for adults who they support, than not offering supervision at all.

- > *It may not be perfect, but it is certainly better than not offering supervision.*

Another benefit may be that online supervision can offer your supervisees the experience of participating in an online conversation about their emotions, and how they are coping in an uncertain context.

- > *This online conversation with your supervisees may in turn help them to reflect upon how the adults and families they support may be experiencing online communication with them.*

It is always a good idea to role reverse with the people we support, wherever possible, reflecting on our own experiences of online supervision with our own supervisors.

- > *What has helped you to feel genuinely seen, heard and attuned with?*

Learning to offer supervision remotely is a new challenge for most people, and it is important to be mindful of our own wellbeing. Remember that working remotely can be tiring – we are simultaneously connected with and disconnected from the people we are communicating with.

- > *Be kind to yourself, and remember to take regular breaks.*

3. Telepresence

The term “telepresence” refers to how well you come across as being a present and attuned listener via the screen and audio functions. Ensuring good telepresence requires a little practice, but will enhance your ability to engage in relationship-based and emotionally literate supervision.

Things to consider include:

- > Make sure that your face is well lit, and that there is no strong light source behind you, otherwise you will appear in silhouette, and it will be hard for the supervisee to see your face and your facial expressions
- > Consider using headphones, as this may improve the audio quality, as well as increasing confidentiality
- > Ensure that your camera is level with your face, rather than being below or above you, as this will increase the quality of the visual image
- > Try to be about an arm’s length from the camera, as this will offer the best quality image
- > Try to look at the webcam, rather than at the image of the supervisee, especially at moments where the conversation may be touching upon emotive themes. This is more likely give the impression that you are making eye contact, which is likely to increase the sense that you are an attuned and attentive listener

4. The practical questions

If you are working from home, using a video function may mean that you and your supervisee are offered a glimpse into each other’s personal lives. We are all familiar with occasions where interviews on news programmes have been interrupted by pets or children, for example. These episodes can be humorous, but they do raise questions about privacy and boundaries.

Your ability to protect your privacy may be influenced by the context of your home environment. Some people may be able to set aside a quiet and private room for their work. However, people who are caring for others, such as children or adults with additional support needs, may be less able to protect their time and space in order to focus on a conversation. People who share their homes with others, such as those who rent a room in a multi-occupancy household, may only be able to ensure privacy in their bedrooms, and even then, may be conscious of others overhearing. So, issues of equality come into play, and may need to be negotiated at the start of the conversation.

Issues for a supervisor to consider in relation to this include:

- > virtual backgrounds are available on most platforms, and can be used to screen off or blur a person’s home environment
- > consider emailing in advance to ask the supervisee whether they require any adaptations relating to accessibility – do they have any additional needs regarding communication or access to technology which may need to be resolved?
- > either in advance of the supervision, or at the beginning, offer an opportunity for the supervisee to share anything they may wish you to know about their home environment, including how comfortable they feel discussing personal or confidential matters

5. Focus on the relationship

Supervision is a profoundly relationship-based activity. Remote supervision can also offer opportunities to maintain and develop supervision relationships, as long as attention is paid to navigating the different forms of communication.

In their review of the literature, *Martin et al (2017)* report that many participants felt remote supervision was on par with face-to-face supervision, particularly when the supervisor and supervisee had already established a positive supervisory relationship in person.

- > They suggest that it can be very helpful if supervisors are flexible about the frequency and lengths of meetings. Some participants expressed a preference for shorter and more frequent supervisions, combined with the supervisor's increased availability by phone or email between supervision sessions.
- > The authors also recommend that more attention is paid to regularly reviewing how the supervisee is experiencing remote supervision, so that adaptations can be made.

These approaches may offer ways of maintaining, and even deepening, the supervision relationship while face to face sessions are not possible.

Tools to support relationship-based practice supervision are available within the [Supervisor Development Programme resources](#).

6. Ways in which you may need to adapt your supervision style

Facilitating supervision online can feel different from being in the same room as each other, as body language and non-verbal communication may be harder to interpret. Active listening skills remain central), tuning in to any auditory and visual cues and listening to the emotional content (which Dr Treisman refers to as 'limbic whispering').

Things to consider include:

- > How will you use your facial expressions and body language? Can you make these more emphatic, without seeming "over the top" or inauthentic? Who might be able to give you feedback about this?
- > How might you begin and end sessions? You may usually have shared a ritual such as making each other a hot drink, or a physical touch such as a handshake, or sharing a story about your life outside work. How can you find ways of replicating this online?
- > At the beginning of the session, make sure to clearly check in with the supervisee, and establish that you have similar understandings of how the supervision process will proceed online. The session may be shorter than you are used to, as it can be difficult to maintain concentration, and you may need more frequent short breaks
- > During the session, you may need to take a more directive and more active role, as some aspects of communication are less obvious online. This will be particularly important if there are more than two people involved in the conversation
- > During the session, and at the end, make sure to invite feedback about how the supervisee is experiencing the process, so that you can make adjustments if necessary.
- > If you usually use written materials in supervision, such as models or diagrams or notes on a flipchart, consider using the Share Screen function which is available on most platforms, or the Whiteboard function on Zoom.
- > Because we are not in the same room, it can be easy to become disinhibited and to check emails or social media. This can lead to less satisfying conversations for everyone involved. So, consider naming this temptation, and putting phones out of reach in a drawer. Agree a contract about checking emails and multi-tasking during the supervision session.



Further resources to support remote and on-line supervision

In her webinar on Bereavement and loss during COVID-19, Dr Karen Treisman signposted to a range of information to help build our skills in emotional literacy in the current context, including:

Dan Siegel's window of tolerance

Dr. Stuart Shanker's work on self-regulation ([here are some resources](#), including a **blog** and **videos** and further resources at <https://self-reg.ca>)

Pat Ogden's work and resources on affect regulation, attachment and trauma

A range of Tools to support the implementation of post-qualifying standards for practice supervisors in adult social care are available online from the Supervisor Development Programme:

<https://adultsdp.researchinpractice.org.uk/tools/>

Gerry Nosowska's recorded webinar for Practice Supervisors: Resilience in COVID-19 available online:

www.researchinpractice.org.uk/adults/content-pages/videos/practice-supervisors-resilience-in-covid-19

References

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