

GETTING SUPPORT

Recognizing when you and your practice would benefit from outside consultation

BY SARAH PATRICK, RCC

- ▶ I'm feeling really triggered after that client: what's going on for me?
- ▶ I dread meeting with this client: what should I do?
- ▶ I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere with this client: what could I try instead?

These are all common and valid questions facing new and experienced counsellors. Who hasn't had a time when they felt triggered in a session and thought, "What was that about?" Other signs we may be struggling with a client or situation include feeling lost and unsure of where we are in the process or what the next steps should be. Maybe we know where we want to go but are not sure how to get there. Or perhaps we just want the reassurance that we've followed the right steps.

Having a second pair of eyes on the situation — someone knowledgeable and experienced — can be beneficial, educational, and a boost to our professional confidence.

Counsellors often work in isolation, and unless we seek opportunities to connect with others in the profession, we may miss out on even casual discussions about new research and procedural changes that bring new perspectives to our work. It is helpful to speak with others who might have different resources or can recommend training we hadn't come across. And sometimes, it goes deeper than

resources and processes, and we need help recognizing a trigger we must move past in order to continue work with a client.

Burnout, the effects of vicarious trauma, and the weight of our own issues can eventually erode our motivation and diminish our skills, making it harder to provide quality care. The question of how to give the best service to clients while taking care of ourselves is at the forefront of every counsellor's mind.

Considering our profession, it is ironic many of us hesitate to seek help for ourselves.

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WHAT STOPS US?

Counsellors may hesitate to seek consultation for a number of reasons, ranging from not being sure when it is needed or if the situation warrants it, to not knowing how to find help or what steps to take once we do.

It can be hard to admit we need help. Even something as simple as checking on procedures can make us feel uncomfortable, as if we don't know our jobs. When a client session triggers a reaction in us, it is often very confusing and difficult to recognize. And not connecting well with clients or feeling a lack of empathy or even hardened can make us feel downright shameful.

Pride can be a piece of it. After all, we are counsellors and we aren't supposed to have problems or need help, right? It makes us feel vulnerable, especially if we are worried about looking incompetent or fear how others will view our struggles.

Not being sure where to access clinical consultation or how to choose

the right consultant creates other challenges, especially if we have heard stories from colleagues about ineffective and problematic consultation.

Then there is the cost. It can be expensive to get consultation and for some of us, that may be the biggest barrier of all, especially if we are new to the profession.

However, not taking the steps means missing out on the benefits and professional growth that can only come from working with a well-trained, experienced consultant. And ultimately, our clients may also miss out, too.

THE BENEFITS OF CONSULTATION

Clinical consultation and supervision are commonly accepted as beneficial to the field by counsellors and researchers alike. It allows us an opportunity to examine our own reactions to clients and client issues, and it supports us in resolving whatever has come up for us so we can proceed with our clients.¹ Consultation provides

support, particularly for novice counsellors, in developing a sense of professional identity.² And from an ethical perspective, it helps us maintain our skills in line with current recommendations. New ethical dilemmas are brought forward continually, and it can be intimidating to be stuck in an ethical dilemma without support.

Encouragement from those who are more experienced helps us to hone our skills, such as problem solving, creativity, emotional awareness, and confidence.³ In addition to supporting growth, getting support also provides some protective factors. Research statistics show a range of 21 to 67 per cent burnout in the mental-health field.⁴ This is clearly an area we need to have good skills to navigate.

But clinical consultation is not only beneficial for the counsellor; it also has benefits for clients. Research has shown that consultation positively affects the working alliance between the counsellor

and client, supports symptom reduction, and aides in treatment retention and valuation.⁵

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All reasons enough to seek guidance when we need it.

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

For consultation to be a successful growth process, mutual trust and respect are necessary. Transparency, authenticity, and openness to hearing and understanding lay the groundwork for a positive sharing of experience and knowledge for both parties.

Qualities to look for in a consultant include empathy, openness, understanding, availability, and experience. You may want to explore this a little more deeply. Do you want someone who is directive or more passive? More or less structured? Someone who leads you or monitors your progress? Do you want someone specialized in a certain area or who practises with a variety of issues?



WHERE DO YOU FIND CLINICAL CONSULTANTS?

David Stewart, an instructor at City University, advises his students to find a consultant, someone they can rely on to help if they get in trouble or, hopefully, prevent trouble.

There are many aspects of consultation that are based on preference — there is no right or wrong — and having a say in the relationship makes you feel more in control.

In a sense, consultation allows counsellors to understand what it feels like on the other side of a counselling relationship, particularly the vulnerability. It also allows for modelling of a safe, trusting relationship, where appropriate boundaries are maintained, something some counsellors struggle to impose for fear of damaging the therapeutic relationship. Consultation also allows for a demonstration and discussion of self-care, which we all need to pay attention to.

To get the most out of consultation, consider a directive as opposed to unstructured plan that includes regularly scheduled meetings. Objectives can be set and agreed upon at the beginning and should be re-evaluated throughout. To ensure

Members can call the BCACC office for access to a list of available consultants organized by region as well as information about areas of specialty if specific assistance is wanted.

Stewart adds that because getting consultation under some circumstances may be scary or uncomfortable, you may want to ask people you already know and trust.

If nothing else, ask the people you went to school with or people whose opinion you value. Sometimes they can make referrals.

“Networking is a really big piece of that and goes a long way toward the safety aspect,” says Stewart.

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consistency, consider creating a contract outlining the services being provided, a schedule, responsibilities, evaluation procedures, and financial compensation.

Most of all, recognize that consultation is worthwhile and valuable to us personally and professionally, as well as to our clients because it makes us better counsellors. ■

Sarah Patrick, RCC, is in private practice in Langley and Abbotsford. She is currently working toward her doctorate in clinical psychology.

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