Becoming a Counsellor: Creating Compassionate Connections

By Dominie Nelson, CCA (Clin), PACFA (Reg)

What does it take to become a counsellor? If I had known at the start what I know now, I would still have made the journey, but in a wiser, more considered way. Knowing the emotional cost, I would have figured out, ahead of time, ways of reducing the pressure on myself and on my most intimate relationships.

Realising the vulnerabilities and insecurities counselling others would raise in me, I would have worked more on myself, and less on therapeutic technique. Encountering the 'gap' between therapeutic knowledge and application of that knowledge, before being confronted by a suffering client (how do you apply Worden's four stages of grief to a grieving individual?) may have prepared me more adequately for that experience than reading a dozen texts on grief management from a theoretical perspective. Counselling courses, however carefully constructed or theoretically well-informed, do not adequately prepare the counsellor to face the exigencies of clinical practice. Courses cannot achieve, within a limited period, and when faced with competing demands, the complex process of forming a counsellor. Becoming a counsellor, and growing as a counsellor, requires me to reduce my defensiveness and increase self-awareness, in short, to take a closer look at myself, the self that I bring to the counselling room.

Counselling is one profession where the practitioner is in fact the tool of his or her trade. It is our character, and our self-awareness, that enables effective, competent practice. Counselling is finding out that who I am dictates how I journey with a struggling client. For a time, my feet dance in time to the music my client hears, be it sad and heavy, slow and measured, or frenetic and impulsive. I feel the rhythms of their lives, resonate to their emotional vibrations, and feel their sorrow, anger and fear. There is a purpose in this, and there is a cost. What has emerged

from the literature on counsellor training and clinical practice is an acknowledgment of the importance of the personal development of the counsellor as an integral part of professional development.

Unhelpful beliefs, unrealistic expectations of self, and acceptance of an unreasonable level of responsibility towards the client are accelerators of stress. The practice of counselling, with its emphasis on confidentiality, can be of itself an isolating experience. Self-awareness, which contributes to counsellor development and effectiveness, can have an unnerving effect when the impact is not managed by self-care and in-session strategies to reduce the impact.

Self-disclosure, which used appropriately, builds trust and rapport, can leave us feeling vulnerable and exposed. Self-exploration, self-disclosure and asking for feedback are means of heightening self-awareness and essential to our facilitating the same process for clients, however, these often exact a price, one of increasing our stress levels, with predictable consequences for our relationships and ourselves.

How are we to manage these stresses, pre-empting the relational consequences, and emerge as resilient, responsive, relational human beings? It would be reckless of me to suggest a single answer, but perhaps we may find assistance in some different types of relationships we can engage in support of personal growth, development and longevity as counsellors. Counselling literature, and my personal experience, suggests two particular types of relationship offering considerable support for both personal and professional needs.

Enter the supervisor, and, the mentor. Increasingly, it is the norm (if not, indeed, ethical and professional imperative) to engage an experienced and knowledgeable practitioner as clinical supervisor at the time clinical practice commences.

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The functions of the supervisory relationship are several, and include overseeing client work, attention to legal and ethical responsibilities, and counsellor development. A supervisor also provides a 'soft place to land' as the demands of practice steadily mount. One of my favourite quotations, succinctly expressing the pleasure of a healthy supervisory relationship, is taken from Carroll and Gilbert's excellent book, On Being a Supervisee.

Restating a meaningful conceptualisation of the counselling relationship, supervision can be considered "a place of trust where a healthy relationship gives me a safe place to acknowledge and work with my clinical concerns, stresses, fears and joys". The qualities of an effective supervisor include, in addition to technical and theoretical knowledge and adequate experience, relational qualities necessary to the development of safety and trust. In addition, the ability to establish a supportive relationship, as an antecedent to productive supervision, requires an understanding of what promotes safety and an optimal learning environment, and the ability to adapt interpersonal behaviour to fit with the needs of the supervisee. A wise supervisee investigates a potential supervisor before making a choice. Questions might include:

- Does this supervisor have appropriate training in the 'how to' of supervision?
- Does he/she still practice? What kind of clients do they see?
- Does he/she have specialised knowledge in an area where I am interested in learning?
- Will he/she be available for regular appointments, and provide support or backup in emergencies?
- How do I feel when I am with this supervisor? Is he/she able to create a comfortable environment in which I feel free to be myself?
- Would I feel able to bring my 'worst work' to this supervisor?
- What do others say about their experiences in relating to this supervisor?

Sometimes, we do not get to choose our supervisor – our workplace assigns one. Where the work context provides supervision, ethical conflicts and compromises may ensue.

In this instance, the supervisory relationship may have an additional evaluative component, and there may be reluctance on the part of the supervisee to appear

incompetent, or to be seen to have difficulty in coping. Fear of the impact of evaluation or perceived failure on workplace dynamics or job security may inhibit self-disclosure and jeopardise the safety needed for effective supervision.

Attempting to provide supervision in a cost effective manner can result in agencies arranging supervision groups, which has the advantage of providing supervision for a number of employees for less cost. This may result in increased tensions for the group members, particularly when managerial and subordinate staff is placed together. In such situations, the supervisory relationship may not alleviate or protect against the stresses of counselling, or allow the counsellor to develop their professional competence and confidence.

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The cost of good quality supervision is also an inhibiting factor in seeking sufficient supervision. At the time at which supervision is most critical – during our early, formative years- it is also least accessible due to the cost ratio involved when considered against counselling income. Availability may be another factor in reducing uptake of supervisory services. Good supervisors can be hard to find.

Where can we find cost-effective and professionally appropriate assistance that will allow development of our full professional and personal abilities? What we need is a relationship in which we find support, encouragement, and benefit from the knowledge of a more experienced person. One who has 'been there, done that' and understands the pitfalls and the pleasures, a relationship combining both supportive and educative elements, without the negative aspects of cost, hierarchy, and personal evaluation. Enter the mentor!

An ancient practice, mentoring is receiving much attention in the post-modern era as a vehicle for learning and development. The use of mentoring as a vehicle for counsellor training is a relatively recent concept, initially viewed as an extension of the supervisory role. There is, however, considerable merit in considering mentoring as a separate, additional role to professional supervision.

The mentor is teacher, sponsor, encourager and friend, who listens, cares and makes him or herself available to the mentoree. At strategic and significant times in my life, I have found a mentor to walk with me, offering guidance and direction, and providing reflective space and an objective (but understanding) sounding board. Mentors have challenged me - "when are you going to stop thinking about this, and start doing it?" supported me "You look exhausted – let's have a coffee" and believed in me "the only one who doesn't believe you can do this is you!" Mentoring, for a counsellor, can be a priceless gift in developing oneself as a person, as well as a professional. Mentors raise awareness and assist in the process of developing insight. Within a supportive relationship, there is opportunity to discover more about self, to explore who I am and how I affect others and to understand how this might play out in the counselling room.

It is a place where feedback illuminates blind spots, and reflection lead to flashbulb moments of insight. Bridging the gap between theory and practice, frequently cited as a difficulty within the counselling profession, is exacerbated by the need for confidentiality, which generally precludes third person observation of counselling practice. Mentors willing to share their experience and knowledge can reduce the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical understanding. Knowledge, plus experience, plus reflection, provides the basis for clinical wisdom. Professional counsellors willing to offer mentoring can clarify therapeutic practices through their use of examples drawn from personal counselling experience, and provide a listening ear while mentorees explore their experiences as counsellor. Mentors normalise difficulties encountered in clinical practice, and help in connecting counselling theory to practice by talking things through, making links between theoretical knowledge and the application of this knowledge.

Who has not, at some time, not longed for a stronger, wiser, kinder 'other' to nurture and to offer guidance? The value of role models for social learning is well accepted, and the mentor is effectively a role model. Indeed, Kottler (2003, p. 28) suggests that the mentoring system forms the core of most therapist education, "shaping who we are and how we practice our craft". As counsellors, who we are constitutes an essential and fundamental part of what we do. Positive relationship qualities derive from character, and these are more 'caught than taught'. Mentoring offers an opportunity for experiential learning, a mentor possessing a relaxed, authentic and genuine way of being with others creates a safe, relaxed environment for learning and development, allowing us to experience the safety essential to effective counselling.

Having this experience prepares counsellors to replicate these qualities in the counselling room. A further advantage, mentoring is relatively free of ethical constraints regarding social and recreational boundaries; the sharing of time together outside of an office environment represents an opportunity to develop the relationship around shared activities and recreational pleasures. Released from constraints of professional roles and context, and the anxieties of having performance evaluated, a relaxed, personal environment enables reflection and exploration, under the guidance of an interested, experienced friend.

Mentoring also benefits those willing to act as mentors, helping the mentor to develop a higher level of personal competency through the experience of teaching. The experience of mentoring is deeply satisfying; we feel the privilege of guiding, encouraging and enhance the development of another who shares our professional interests. Mentors, however, do not turn out 'clones'; rather, they see and draw out the potential of each mentoree, highlighting and enhancing the qualities and abilities that come together to form a counsellor with a unique contribution to make.

Mentoring and supervision can work together to prepare the pre-professional counsellor for clinical practice, and a mentoring relationship may transition to a supervisory relationship (as long as appropriate attention is paid to the differences between the two relationships). Once a counsellor commences clinical practice, a mentoring relationship may supplement, but not replace, regular supervision.

As counsellors progress from Associates, to Graduate and Clinical levels of professional membership, mentors and supervisors may promote and sponsor their protégés, introducing them to people and opportunities, and generally assisting in their professional development. Counsellors, mentors and supervisors, working together, make a difference to the counselling profession, and to those who come to counsellors, seeking help. Together they creating a credible and effective workforce, a power for change in our nation, a power for good in our world.

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A creative counsellor with a sensitive soul and quirky sense of humour, Dominie is dedicated to helping people reach their potential. Dominie's training and experience equip her to work as a counsellor and psychotherapist with anxiety and stress, depression and self esteem, and a multiplicity of relationship issues, and includes specialist training in addiction, trauma and abuse. In recent years Dominie has specialised in working with victims of trauma. As a counsellor, supervisor and lecturer in interpersonal and counselling skills with Life Design Counselling and Education, Dominie's desire is to see every individual achieve satisfaction in life and relationships.

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