Consumer Perspective Supervision Coursework: Reflective Journal

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Prior to beginning CPS training, I had just started in my role as a ‘Senior Peer Worker’ where I had found myself, for the first time ever, providing supervision to other peers. I can easily recall the anxiety I felt before facilitating my very first session, feeling as though I was flying blind but trying to lean into my peer values as best as I could. The opportunity to do CPS training brought an immense sense of relief to me as I felt I was finally going to be given the answers. By answers, I meant an instruction manual I could apply to my practice, one so neat and convenient that I could seamlessly morph into the perfect supervisor. Reflecting after each supervision session my head would swim with big questions; *‘Did they find that helpful? How could they when I felt like I couldn’t give them any solutions?’, ‘Can they tell I don’t know what I’m doing?’, ‘What if I’ve only confused them further?’, ‘Am I even doing this right? I’m probably the worst supervisor they’ve ever had.’* The learnings I have taken away from CPS have shifted my perspective in a multitude of ways and I hope to share some of these with you.

Key Learning 1: A note on perfectionism

Looking back at those early supervision sessions, I realised that I was robbing both myself and the person I was supervising of genuine authenticity. The pressure I placed on myself to perform as what I thought was a ‘perfect’ supervisor meant taking all my messy humanness and tucking it neatly away. How could I expect the person to show up as they are with honesty and authenticity if I could not? Part of what contributed to approaching this supervision this way was a fear of failure and of being ‘found out’ as the imposter I saw myself as, but it was also a fundamental misunderstanding of what supervision could be.

I now believe that neither connection nor mutuality can exist without authenticity and honesty. I imagined what it would be like to sit on the other side of this dynamic and I realised that this was also stopping me from being able to build trust with that person. I realised how distancing it would feel to sit across from someone who was trying their hardest not to seem fallible or human. As a peer worker, this sat in almost exact opposition to the values we are trained to hold in our practice. Realising CPS was deeply complimentary to them was a significant weight off my shoulders.

I had also learnt that in my short time supervising, I had also been overestimating the role I had in facilitating learning in the space. Instead of approaching supervision from the angle of 'how can I ensure this person learns as much as possible', it was a relief to realise that it is in fact the role of *both* people to create a space for *both* to learn and grow. It was also a joy to realise that this co-learning could also be flexible and adaptable to the unique needs, intentions and expectations of the supervisee mainly, but also my own. It was a freeing and exciting thing to discover mutuality in this sense and since adapting this into my practice, has brought immeasurable benefits to the supervision spaces I sit in.

Key Learning 2: Having the 'answers' and being the 'expert'

Part of this learning curve around mutuality was the realisation that both our experiences and expertise were required in the space, not just my own. Within my workplace, the only peer workers able to facilitate supervision are those in a designated 'Senior' role, who are hired in this capacity as they hold 'more experience' as a peer worker than those without the title. During CPS training, I was able to deep dive into unpacking exactly what this meant for how I approached supervision and my perspective began to shift. I was acutely aware of the power imbalance this presented in the sessions I facilitated because I could *feel* it. It felt uncomfortable existing in this hierarchy and I ultimately felt burdened by it. In the past I wanted to rid myself of imposter syndrome as quickly as possible, but I have since realised it was trying to tell me something important all along. That discomfort I felt about needing to hold the answers and come across as the expert was also trying to tell me I shouldn't. One of the hardest lessons I learnt in CPS was that actually, there should be no 'answers' to be given at all and that expectation was also actively undermining the supervisee's own expertise.

However, this also brought comfort to me, in that I could (and should) let down my guard and appreciate the opportunity to co-learn, bringing in both our experiences and expertise to openly explore topics we discussed together. I realised that moving away from suggesting solutions to being curious, asking inquisitive and open-ended questions, some beautiful things began to blossom. It solidified my understanding of CPS as a reflective space and a non-directive practice, aiming to support the person to come to their own conclusions. In applying this while studying the course, I observed that the connection I had with those I supervised began to grow. Rather than shutting down curious exploration with advice and the sole use of my one perspective, I was offered a window into their world and theirs into mine. The richness of our conversations deepened and we became comfortable enough to gently challenge *each other.* Prior to CPS training I might have interpreted gentle challenging from a supervisee as their way of confirming all my fears I had that I was an imposter. What a welcome shift it has been to now not only accept it but actively encourage and celebrate it, making room for alternative views and other possibilities instead of unambiguous rights and wrongs.

Key Learning 3: Power Imbalances

Another significant perspective shift came in the form of naming the power imbalances that frequently exist in supervision relationships and certainly exist in

mine. The concept of openly addressing and talking about this in supervision scared me, as if naming it would somehow ‘make it real’. I realised I found comfort in not discussing it, as being the one who holds more power in a space is an uncomfortable thing. I was also scared that it would create a disconnect between us somehow. I reflected on the way this shows up with my own supervisor who is in higher leadership and realised that naming it had strengthened the relationship between us, not alienated us from each other. It was a relief to know she was aware of it as a reality that presented itself in our supervision space and impacted how I felt within it.

I realised by keeping silent about this imbalance I was both reinforcing it and prioritising my comfort over the connection I had with the person and the sense of mutuality we should have been trying to build. I could feel myself wondering ‘well if we only facilitated supervision laterally this wouldn’t be an issue’, but of course, power differentials would always exist in one form or another regardless. Feeling my perspective shift away from ‘don’t name that because that’s scary and alienating and you’ll make them feel powerless’ towards ‘they will always exist and we must acknowledge and discuss how to navigate them’ has been one of the most important learnings from CPS training.

Key Learning 4: Connecting to the Consumer Movement

Connecting my peer work practice to the consumer movement in an intentional way is a skill I have built over the course of my time as a peer worker. Prior to my current workplace, supervision was not a space where the consumer movement was discussed, nor the concept of the consumer perspective explicitly addressed. Learning about the consumer movement in greater depth during this training and how it can be included in supervision allowed me to experience the benefits to openly discussing it in real time.

My perspective has shifted towards understanding supervision not just as a reflective space, but as somewhere an individual can come to feel a sense of community and greater sense of shared purpose. To provide CPS without meaningfully including the consumer movement deprives the opportunity for a person to see themselves as connecting to something greater than themselves. It is easy to forget, particularly when working in isolation as so many of us do, that we exist in the broader context of a human rights movement and are, by extension, human rights workers. This lens is an incredibly important one in not only understanding our role and its importance, but in understanding the challenges we each face existing in opposition to dominant narratives around mental health and the structures and systems that uphold them. Such challenges are inherent in working from a consumer perspective within our current mental health system and connecting these struggles to our broader movement can allow us to see the bigger picture. In a supervision space, I have seen this be validating of day-to-day challenges and the experiences around them, particularly when discussing ethical dilemmas. I have also since seen it be a motivating force, a reminder that we exist as a whole community connected by a shared vision and stand on the shoulders of many incredible people who have come before us. Bringing this into a supervision

space is a privilege but also a necessity and I believe CPS has a valuable role to play in fuelling momentum for the consumer movement as a whole.

Summary

In short, my journey through CPS training has been a powerful paradigm shifter in the way I approach supervision and has deepened my peer practice in ways I am still continuing to discover. Pivoting to the future, I will continue to strive to uphold CPS values as best as I can while accepting the inherently imperfect outcomes that will follow. I feel confident that I will continue to undergo many learnings along the way and feel privileged to be in a workplace where I am both facilitating and receiving CPS. Altogether, that is a great deal of co-learning from some rather remarkable people and I embrace the many speed bumps and learning opportunities to follow.

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