6.2 SUPERVISING PEERS: SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION

> *It can become sort of overwhelming at times because I live with HIV myself and then I work with HIV and I go to seminars about HIV. I'm learning ways to balance it by reading and listening to classical music and spending time with people, with my family.*

Lionel Biggins
Peer Educator
Truman Medical Center
Kansas City, MO

Introduction

While the supportive supervisory approach borrows from clinical supervision, non-clinical staff can readily utilize the methods and tools described here. Many clinics and organizations choose to identify one person who will provide both administrative and supportive supervision, while other programs may choose to separate the roles and have one person provide administrative supervision while another team member, licensed mental health professional, or intern provides supportive or clinical supervision to peers on an ongoing basis. As stated earlier, it is important to preserve the integrity of the role of supervisor, whether administrative, supportive or clinical, when providing the guidance appropriate to that role. Although it is cost effective to have the same individual provide both administrative and supportive or clinical supervision, it can create some role confusion for the peer as well as the organizational system. It is recommended to have two individuals designated to provide two distinct types of supervision.

What is the rationale for a supportive approach and how do peers benefit? In the fields of psychology and social work, it is well recognized that people serving in a helping capacity require a supportive approach to supervision and training. Formal structures within psychology and social work programs are set up to provide students and interns with weekly clinical supervision, support from colleagues, and even their own short- or long-term psychotherapy treatments. These requirements serve the function of helping students deal with stress and teaching them to navigate a profession in which they are expected to hold and contain clients' stress and problems without absorbing it in a harmful way.

Peers have strikingly similar challenges to those faced by psychology and social work students and interns. While this applies more heavily to peers who specifically provide emotional support, most peers, no matter what their role, face situations that require them to attend to clients who are presenting with acute or chronic stress and other psychosocial challenges. The difference is that peers usually have received little or no formal training in the helping professions, nor have they benefited from the structures in place for social work

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and psychology students. Supportive supervision for peers is part of the solution for addressing this difference, so that peers may thrive in their roles.

Supportive supervision draws on the tenets of clinical supervision to offer peers the opportunity for individualized support and training. However, there are some distinct differences between a clinician-client relationship and a peer-client relationship. Peers do not provide a clinical service to clients, and it is not in their scope of work to diagnose and treat any kind of clinical condition. On the contrary, peers present to clients an allied relationship in which the client is free to feel unconcerned about being diagnosed and treated. Ironically, what often occurs between peer and client is inadvertently therapeutic, due to the safe nature of the relationship. This is why a supervision approach that borrows from social work and mental health is so crucial for peers.

A supportive supervisor can help peers appropriately respond to clients who begin to share serious concerns that may ultimately merit attention from the larger clinical team, or from other community agencies. Furthermore, the supportive supervisor can help the peer set appropriate functional and emotional boundaries with clients. In a therapeutic relationship, the goal of the clinician is to intervene in difficult interpersonal dynamics to help clients become aware of dysfunctional patterns. In a peer relationship, the goal is for the peer to sustain the relationship. This type of support may be therapeutic for the client, but it is not the goal. A supportive supervisor will want to help a peer sustain the relationship with the client by helping with boundary setting and staying within the scope of work as a peer.

Most importantly, peers benefit from support in managing the stress involved in serving multiple clients. Understandably, peers come into the field feeling as if it is their duty to help clients in measurable ways. In fact, their work may actually be measured through organizational quality assurance efforts. For peers, it can feel tremendously disempowering to run up against perceived failures to help clients in an immediate fashion. When these perceived failures happen frequently, and with clients whom they care for, this can feel overwhelming and disillusioning. Peers do begin to care for their clients, and this is in alignment with the work of a peer, as it distinguishes peer work from the more "objective" stances of medical and mental health providers.

In short, supportive supervision provides an opportunity for peers to talk openly and safely about their work with clients. As described above, supportive supervision offers the peer a way in which to work effectively with clients while understanding that the peer's own personal experiences may impact his or her work.

General Principles for Conducting Supportive Supervision

Supportive supervision lends tremendous assistance to peers in their efforts to manage the multi-layered dimensions of their own lives with HIV while supporting clients in managing theirs. Engaging in a process of supportive supervision for non-clinical staff, specifically for peers, is essential for building staff competency, knowledge, and retention. It is recommended that supportive supervision occur in a consistent way, whether it is weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. In this way, the supervisee can rely on having regular time to discuss work issues including the nature of the work and how it may impact him or her, both personally and professionally.

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LaTrischa Miles (left) with a peer.

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Some of the important skills used in supervision are good listening skills, good communication skills, verbal and non-verbal. Being open-minded in a supervisory role is very important, because as a supervisor, I don't have all the answers. [Peers are] living with a chronic disease, so you need to have some flexibility.

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LaTrischa Miles
Peer Supervisor
Kansas City Free Health Clinic
Kansas City, MO

There are several components that make up the foundation of supportive supervision: building a trusting relationship between the supervisor and the peer; allowing the peer to explore feelings and reactions that emerge; and creating a model of the peer-client relationship. The following outlines the general principles of conducting supportive supervision:

- The supervisor recognizes that this supervision time is dedicated to the peer.
- The supervisor creates a safe space. There are no interruptions during supervision, if possible, and the peer is encouraged to share any concerns.
- The supervisor sets a time that is consistent and convenient for the supervisor and peer.
- The focus of the supervision meeting remains on the development needs and concerns of the peer.
- The supervisor and peer set the agenda together.
- The supervisor is open to exploring the feelings and reactions of the peer that can help the peer reflect on working with clients who are part of their community.
- The supervisor uses open-ended questions to help the peer share their work with clients. The supervisor can use a case discussion framework.
- The supervisor is responsive and empathic and encourages the peer to use his or her insight into the community to respond to client issues.
- The supervisor provides guidance and resources.
- The supervisor remains non-judgmental in his or her approach.

Supportive Supervision Objectives and Supervisory Goals

A supportive supervisory approach will allow the supervisor to:

- Build and sustain trusting relationships with peers.
- Support successful client outcomes.
- Promote positive peer retention rates.
- Help peers transfer personal knowledge to peer work.
- Offer personalized support and training to peers.
- Provide a venue for consistently offering supervisory feedback.

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During individual and group supervision meetings, a supportive supervisor will want to:

• Provide individualized support and training for each peer.
• Monitor case loads.
• Assist the peer in forming client care plans.
• Help peers manage feelings that arise about/towards clients.
• Support peers in identifying and addressing work and personal stress related to working with clients.
• Help peers link their personal experience and knowledge to their work with clients.
• Help peers identify and build on what works with clients.
• Help peers maintain appropriate expectations for themselves and their clients
• Ensure that peers stay within their scope of work and make appropriate referrals when necessary.
• Periodically evaluate peers' work performance in collaboration with the administrative supervisor (if these roles are played by separate people).

Development of a Supportive Supervisory Perspective

The supportive supervisor's perspective determines how he or she will approach peer supervision and how peers will respond to the approach. Peers usually have little or no formal professional training, yet they are hired for their expertise with the client population. It is critical that supportive supervisors communicate in verbal and non-verbal ways and show respect for the value that peers bring to the organization.

Supportive supervisors can develop a supportive perspective by:

• Actively listening and learning from the peers they supervise.
• Taking into account cultural differences and HIV-status differences between supervisor and peer.
• Maintaining a stance of active curiosity by asking open-ended questions.
• Asking clarifying questions when confused about how or why a peer is taking a specific approach with a client before inserting a "professional" opinion.
• Periodically ask peers if they are getting their needs met in supervision and group settings.

Read More: Coaching Model for Supportive Supervision illustrates some key approaches to providing supportive supervision to peers.

Helping Peers Link Personal Experience to Client Work

This is truly the heart of peer work. Peers offer clients a perspective based on personal experience—experience that often mirrors the challenges that clients themselves face. The power of the peer is his or her ability to draw from and share personal experience with clients in order to help clients feel that they are not alone, and that they too can solve challenging problems. A supportive supervisor can coach peers to draw from personal experience to help peers understand how they can be helpful to clients. A supportive supervisor can also help peers offer clients personal examples in a way that respects the differences between the peer and the client.

To read more about supportive supervision, including a breakdown of how these functions can be addressed, along with tools, suggested approaches and approximate time lengths for each component, see the Program Resources and Read More sections listed on the next page.

SUPERVISING PEERS: SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION

Read More for Subsection 6.2

- The coaching model for supportive supervision
- Troubleshooting difficult cases and supporting peer efforts
- Recognizing and addressing countertransference
- Tasks and tools for developing a supportive approach
- Peer support groups and structured group supervision
- Understanding boundaries in peer-client relationships

Additional Supervision Subsections

- Supervising Peers: Introduction
- 6.1 Administrative Supervision
- 6.2 Supportive Supervision
- 6.3 Clinical Supervision

Resources for Section 6

(available at http://peer.hdwg.org/program_dev/resources)

- Framework for supportive supervision case discussion (JRI)
- Framework for clinical case consultation tool (JRI)
- Administrative supervision tools (The Lotus Project)
- Supportive supervision tools (The Lotus Project)
- Supervision Tools (The PACT Project)
- Peer weekly staffing report (Project ARK)

This section is part of the online toolkit *Building Blocks to Peer Program Success*. For more information, visit http://peer.hdwg.org/program_dev .