

# e Newsletter April 2017 - How to choose a supervisor

## How to choose a supervisor

**For new graduates, choosing a supervisor is a significant decision with the potential to impact early career direction. Associate Professor Kathryn Nicholson Perry and Dr Brendan Meagher share their reflections on choosing a supervisor for the registrar program.**

How did you feel about the supervision, and the supervisors, that you had during your clinical training? Maybe in some cases you immediately clicked, and you can see yourself continuing to have a professional relationship with them into the future. Perhaps in others it was awkward, even tricky at times.

Most of us have little choice about who supervises us during training, but once you graduate and transition into the registrar program the decision is down to you. This is potentially a relatively long term relationship, and the success of it may set the course for the direction of your early career. This is both an opportunity and a challenge. What should you look for? Where might you find them? What should you avoid? Drawing on the wisdom of ex-students who have already had to navigate this, and our own experience supervising registrars, we'd like to offer you some food for thought.

### **A key relationship**

We're sure that you would all think to look to the psychological literature for some help in answering the question of what characteristics to look for in a supervisor, but it is one of those areas where there is little on offer about this specific situation.

As with our relationships with clients, the relationship between supervisor and supervisee is acknowledged to be key, and in fact a significant predictor of satisfaction of supervisees reflecting on their experience of supervision. But how do you know in advance how that relationship will develop? The Psychology Board of Australia offers assistance in locating supervisors who are approved to supervise registrars, but little guidance beyond that.

Given that, ask yourself what factors were important in differentiating your best previous experiences of supervision from the others. What were the characteristics of those supervisors? How was supervision structured? What did you get from the supervisor that really made a difference? Some of these things will be replicable in future supervisory relationships, so think about how you might assess the likelihood they would be present in a relationship with a prospective supervisor. We encourage you to ask your potential supervisor questions to get an understanding of what to expect in supervision with them. You are interviewing each other, not just being interviewed by them!

### **Financial matters**

Most of us finishing our clinical training are looking forward to having some income, and so cost may be a salient issue. Some positions offer to provide registrar supervision as part of the package, and while this can relieve the financial burden it may create other issues. Dual relationships, where a supervisor is perhaps also your direct line manager, can impact on your ability to be open and honest about difficulties or challenges you might experience. It is important to recognise there will be difficulties, everyone experiences them, so you need to think about whether the nature of your other relationships with your supervisor will mean you can't lean on them when times are tough.

In addition, if you change job during your registrar program you may lose access to this supervisor, and having someone who can travel the road with you from start to finish is often extremely helpful.

If this is the route you go down, you may find it useful to also have access to an independent person as a secondary supervisor to help ameliorate these risks. Conversely, having an on-site supervisor can also have its advantages, such as direct access to your supervisor and the opportunity for informal guidance and support when required. An on-site supervisor may also be better placed to understand the demands of your work role and to be actively involved with you in setting and reviewing your learning goals.

### **Skills and knowledge**

What about the supervisor having expert knowledge or skills? This can be very important where you are perhaps getting to grips with a new area of practice or set of therapeutic skills. However, don't forget that your registrar period includes addressing all of the relevant competencies, and so you need someone who can see your progress in the round.

Sometimes it is helpful to make use of secondary supervisors who can contribute specialist content or modality knowledge, but retain a primary supervisor who can help you integrate together the different components of your registrar program and the learning and development that entails.

There are a lot of transitions and milestones to navigate in the registrar period of your career. In many ways, the key task of your supervisor is to help you transform from a student, perhaps more used to being directed than setting your own direction, to an independent professional who can self-supervise, analyse your own learning needs in a rapidly evolving professional landscape, and plan professional development to keep yourself current over a lifetime of professional practice.

Such a person needs to be able to guide you through learning the skills to do this in a supportive yet challenging way. It is when a supervisor can find that balance between supporting you and challenging you that you are likely to have the best supervision experience.

The choice of who can best do that will be different for each of you. Reflect on your experiences, and tap into your emerging professional networks, your peers, your previous supervisors and academic mentors, and your professional bodies to find out who is around who might fit the bill. And try and resist the pressure to commit to something that doesn't feel right.

**Associate Professor Kathryn Nicholson Perry** is a clinical psychologist at the Australian College of Applied Psychology where she is involved in the professional psychology programs. She has a strong research background in supervision and medical rehabilitation including pain.

**Dr Brendan Meagher** is a clinical psychologist running Mind Health Care, a private practice in Geelong, Victoria. He has 10 psychologists in his practice, four of whom are clinical psychology registrars. Brendan has for many years provided clinical supervision particularly to early career psychologists.