

Chapter 11

HELP WITH BOUNDARIES: SUPPORT, CONSULTATION, AND SUPERVISION

Few of us have training in professional relationship skills. True, our common sense and natural instincts are often enough to get us by, but to become solid professionals, we often need outside help and support.

Support can help keep our spark and enthusiasm for our work alive, and that can make a difference in how well we keep boundaries. Learning how to practice good boundaries isn't merely a question of memorizing rules; we can know what we're supposed to do and still make mistakes. How well we maintain boundaries can depend on our overall emotional health and even on how we're feeling on any particular day. Discouragement, loneliness, and boredom take their toll on boundary skills. Perhaps the reason for the most common boundary problem—practitioners using clients as a captive audience—comes from the fact that many practitioners feel isolated and want someone to talk with.

Nobody tells us this in school, but it can be lonely out there. Some of us work in isolation—in our homes, in a private office—and we're alone with clients who may be needy or hurting and looking to us for relief. Even if we work in a spa or an office with other massage therapists, we may not receive enough support in our everyday work lives.

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Most somatic practitioners find that this work isn't as simple as just giving a rubdown. We work every day with issues of intimacy, dependency, and pain. We all have unresolved beliefs and attitudes that can get in our way. For instance, some of us were raised to believe that we shouldn't complain about aches and pains, that suffering in silence shows strength. How will we feel about clients who come in with a long list of complaints—as is their right? Some of us were brought up to feel that taking care of ourselves and saying no to others is selfish. Will we then be able to draw the line when a client with a sore back wants an appointment on our day off?

Regardless of our work setting, how well we handle the relationship aspect of our work can make or break our practices. We need to build into our work lives an abundance of ways to get support, feedback, and new perspective.

Consultation:

A meeting with a professional trained in psychological dynamics to get advice about and insight into a particular client or issue.

Supervision:

An ongoing arrangement made with a professional trained in psychological dynamics for help with the relationship aspects of a practitioner's work.

Several options for help are available: **consultation**; clinical **supervision**, both in groups and individually; peer support groups; peer supervision groups; and mentoring. Since most of these are still new ideas for the profession, this chapter explores them in detail.

Basics of Consultation, Supervision, and Groups

Many practitioners are learning how to untangle client relationships by consulting with another professional. This might be a one-time consultation about a perplexing situation or ongoing supervision for support and insight.

The consultant or supervisor should be someone who is both experienced in psychological dynamics and appreciative of the issues involved in bodywork and massage therapy. That would be either a bodyworker or massage therapist who also has training or credentials in relationship dynamics or a mental health practitioner who respects the special problems associated with bodywork and massage therapy. The mental health practitioner doesn't need to be trained in bodywork or massage techniques, since technique won't be discussed (see "Choosing a Consultant or Supervisor" later in this chapter).

Consultation

In a consultation, you and your consultant meet outside the session to discuss a particular client or situation. Although the professional might be a psychotherapist or counselor, this kind of consultation isn't the same as psychotherapy. The purpose is to deal with work-related issues. Although you might discover your countertransference issues, personal subjects won't be probed to the same depth as they would be in psychotherapy. Here are some examples of how a consultant could help.

Massage therapist Mary dreads the days when she sees her client Fred, who constantly complains about his life. Try as she might to be patient, Mary always ends up feeling irritated by his negative outlook.

In this case, a consultant might, for instance, help Mary realize that Fred reminds her of her father, who disappointed her with his sour outlook on life. Simply having an awareness of how she might be transferring feelings about her father to her client could help Mary work with the client more objectively and compassionately. (If this were psychotherapy, Mary would probably be urged to explore her history and feelings about her father in greater depth.) Also, having that insight would probably help Mary to respond more positively when other clients turn out to be complainers.

Bodyworker Bob has a client who sometimes cries about her failing marriage during her sessions. Lately, she has seemed more depressed, crying frequently and saying she feels hopeless. Bob wants the client to feel free to express her emotions with him, but he has never been entirely comfortable with her crying, and he now feels overwhelmed by her despair. He thinks she should see a counselor but doesn't know how to suggest that without hurting her feelings or making her feel rejected.

Bob could discuss several issues with a consultant. He may want to explore his discomfort when a client cries. He might learn, for instance, that crying is generally a healthy release for clients and that he doesn't need to be concerned about occasional tears or feel that he must cheer up the client. He may also learn that in this case, the client could be showing signs of the kind of depression that needs expert help. A consultant could help him identify those warning signals. Furthermore, Bob could learn some skills in referring a client to a counselor. In this instance, he could let her know that although he is concerned and committed to working with her as her massage therapist, he also wonders if she might want to seek professional counseling to help her get through this difficult time.

When to Use Consultation

Here are some red flags that could indicate you would benefit from a consultation:

- Any strong negative feelings about a client that persist, such as frequently feeling impatient or annoyed with a client, feeling drained by a client, or downright disliking a client
- Strong positive feelings about a client, wanting to make special exceptions for a client without objective reasons, or wanting to have a sexual relationship with a client
- Working with a client who is actively dealing with issues of sexual or physical abuse
- Working with a clients who seems unusually depressed or who you suspect might be mentally unbalanced
- Having trouble setting limits with a particular client

Supervision

Rather than waiting until they have a problem with a client or are in trouble, many practitioners choose ongoing supervision to gain new awareness and ease in their relationships with clients and to break the isolation of their



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practices. Supervision can also help when you feel bored with your work. Again, this type of supervision is not about the hands-on aspect of your work; it's about helping you improve your professional relationships with clients.

“Supervision” may sound like someone telling you what to do or how to run your business, and that may make you wary. However, a good supervisor supports and guides rather than giving unasked-for advice or making you feel inadequate. Time with a supervisor should feel like a visit with a helpful, friendly teacher.

Unlike a consultation, which is generally a one-time or occasional meeting, with supervision, you would get together on a regular basis, perhaps monthly. The goal is to increase your awareness of yourself as a professional and to clarify your strengths and vulnerabilities in the relationship aspect of dealing with clients. (Getting a consultation is a good way to check out how well you would work with another professional you are considering for a supervisor.)

Good supervision can give you confidence and free you up to do your best work

Supervision could make your work life more satisfying by helping you understand stumbling blocks that get in your way and by giving you support when you need it, for instance, with setting limits, trusting your intuition, or appreciating your assets. Good supervision can give you confidence and free you up to do your best work.

A colleague reports:

At first, I didn't like the idea of supervision, mostly because I was afraid I'd look stupid. After all, I'd been practicing for many years, and I thought I was supposed to have all the answers. However, a friend seemed to be getting so much from her supervision that I decided to try it. To my delight, it was a big boon to my practice. My attitude and behavior toward my clients became more understanding, and clients responded positively to that. The client I had thought was annoying and demanding turned out to be a likable woman who was just frightened about giving up control. The client that I had judged as weird and eccentric turned into a loyal long-term client when I became less judgmental of him. I began to understand my unhelpful patterns and also how to help clients feel more comfortable with me as their practitioner. My practice increased and I am happier with my work life.

When to Use Supervision

You don't need a special reason to seek out supervision. You may just want to grow as a professional, or you may want your practice to be more satisfying. While you would seek out a one-time consultation for a particular client, for instance, you can use supervision when you notice patterns that don't serve you well in your relationships with clients. Here are some red flags that could signal the need for supervision:

- Having a good number of clients who seem "difficult" or controlling
- Having a lot of clients who challenge your boundaries
- Making friends with clients more than once in a blue moon
- Realizing that you take on the issues, feelings, or energy of a client in a way that depletes you
- Often feeling sexually attracted to clients
- Frequently feeling drained or exhausted at the end of the day
- Often feeling bored with your work
- Any negative feelings about clients that persist

The Power of Groups

Some practitioners prefer getting together with colleagues, either with or without a leader or consultant, to share their experiences and knowledge. Some believe that support from colleagues is a must in a profession that is so minimally recognized and acknowledged in the culture. Also, because of the element of touch, somatic practitioners face unique issues that may be understood best by their colleagues.

People who stay with this work over the long haul are usually part of a strong group or community of colleagues that support and educate each other.

Many of us have little contact or serious discussion with other manual therapists. Even if we work around other massage therapists, we don't always take the time for serious discussion. I have given workshops in which bodyworkers start a question with "Maybe I'm the only one this happens to . . ." and then relate a situation that is commonly experienced by practitioners. It helps to have the reassurance that others are dealing with the same dilemmas.

It also helps to have the validation of talking with a respected colleague or a group of colleagues when you are learning how to set boundaries and limits with your clients. Getting outside support and ideas is fortification for dealing with manipulative or hard-to-handle clients.

Especially in the first years of your practice, you may not know enough to know when you are in over your head or when what a client needs is beyond the scope of your methods or beyond your expertise. You might not fully trust your intuition or recognize a red flag.

Getting together with colleagues in an open, honest, and nonjudgmental environment can be comforting, confidence building, and a boon to your practice. People who stay with this work over the long haul are usually part of a strong group or community of colleagues that support and educate each other.

GROUP SUPERVISION

Less expensive than individual supervision, group supervision is great for dealing with isolation. It's also a good way for inexperienced practitioners to learn the common client-relationship issues of this work and gather ideas about the ways others deal with problems that are shared by all practitioners. As with peer support groups, hearing the struggles of others in the group can help you see that you're not alone or unique in the kind of dilemmas that you have. The difference between a peer support group and group supervision is that a supervision group is led by a supervisor and there is usually a fee for attending.

A massage therapist from Seattle praises her supervision group:

My supervision group has been getting together for a year, meeting every 3 weeks. We alternate meeting with just each other and meeting with a supervisor. Being in the group is helping me move to a place that is healthier with my client relations.

For instance, I've learned that I was brought up to see my value as a person as how "helpful" and "selfless" I could be. Now I don't work so hard and long on a client that my thumbs are aching, as I used to. I won't take one more client that will be too taxing for my body or mind. I don't take responsibility for clients' healing. I empower them in their



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healing process. My relationships with my clients feel cleaner with less hidden agendas. And I'm making more money!

I actually went into supervision to learn how to run my business better and make more money. But what was most helpful was that I learned about my boundary problems during the course of being in the group. It's ironic that my initial goals are being met in an entirely roundabout way!

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

It is possible to meet as a group of practitioners to discuss common issues without a supervisor. Peer groups are not supervised by any of the members and have different benefits than groups that include supervision. Nan Narboe, clinical social worker and boundaries expert, says:

There are things that only your peers will tell you and that you can only hear from your peers. For instance, if our supervisor praises the way we

responded to a difficult client, we may assume she's "just being nice." If we hear the same praise from our peers, we tend to believe it. There are times, however, when individual supervision is best. There are things that only your supervisor will tell you and that you can only hear from your supervisor, such as where your blind spots are.

Peer groups are an excellent and inexpensive way to get support and learn from others. Groups may also want to hire a consultant to work with them occasionally on a specific issue or for a specific purpose.

Jack Blackburn, LMP, certified Trager practitioner, registered counselor, and supervisor for bodyworkers, reinforces the need for meeting with colleagues: "The main reason practitioners burn out isn't because they work too hard or take too much responsibility for their clients. It's because they don't have a place to talk with other massage therapists and bodyworkers about what happens in their practices." In peer groups, practitioners can learn how to support each other's learning by using active listening and other techniques to help each other understand their relationships with clients.

Benefits of Supervision and Consultation

Whether you work with a group or individually, here are some of the reasons that consultations and supervision about client-practitioner dynamics are invaluable to both inexperienced and seasoned practitioners.

Identifying Blind Spots

We all have less-than-positive ways of interacting that we tend to put out of our awareness—ways that we might unconsciously hurt clients, ways that we might overstep boundaries. We need feedback from someone who has the skill and willingness to tell us what we do not see about ourselves. Our teachers don't always do this, nor do all friends, partners, or spouses. We like to think of ourselves as always caring, and it can be painful to have someone, even diplomatically, point out ways we might be insensitive to others. But how else are we going to learn?

Ethics consultant Daphne Chellos says it straight out:

Supervision is a preventive measure against abusing clients. Abuse can be unintentional as well as intentional, subtle as well as blatant. As humans, all of us can be "victims" and all of us can be "aggressors." Our tendency is to remember violations against us and to either forget

or ignore our aggressive acts. This blind spot exists as well in therapeutic relationships. A competent supervisor will notice when a therapist is being inappropriate or abusive, no matter how subtly or unintentionally, and bring it to the therapist's attention. (Chellos D. Supervision in bodywork: borrowing a model from psychotherapy. *Massage Ther J.* 1991;Winter:15.)

“Abuse” may seem like a strong word. It is used here to mean anything a practitioner does that could, even in a minor way, take advantage of or wound a client—from an insensitive remark about the client's body to overcharging for services.

Keeping Confidentiality

Clients tell us their secrets. Even if they don't tell us, we might guess. Perhaps we realize how frightened that successful, confident-looking businessman actually is because we see the tension in his body. Maybe we sense the underlying sadness of the vivacious woman who tries so hard to be upbeat. Clients confide in us about their private lives and concerns, but as professionals, we're not allowed to talk about our clients with our colleagues, friends, or families, and we're certainly not allowed to divulge anything they say. As Trager instructor Amrita Daigle says, “If we don't have someone who we can talk with in professional confidence, we will tend to gossip about our clients.” It can become a burden to carry all that pain, all those secrets. Having a supervisor who is also bound by rules of confidentiality gives us a way to share that burden.

Easing Guilt

I've talked with many practitioners who feel ashamed of an instance when they used poor judgment or went outside ethical boundaries. Sometimes no harm was done to the client, and sometimes the practitioner couldn't have foreseen the problem. However, these moments weigh on practitioners who strive to be ethical. Talking with a trusted supervisor or consultant helps put those mistakes in perspective. A good supervisor or consultant will hear our mistakes and errors without making us feel ashamed or incompetent.

Recognizing Prejudice

How do we really feel about working with people of other races, gays and lesbians, overweight people, the chronically ill, racists, Orthodox Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and born-again Christians—just to name a few groups? What about people who voted for the candidate we campaigned against? Or

sexist men, pampered women, angry feminists? Do any of these types of people make our hearts snap shut? Everyone makes prejudgments to some degree. Consultation and supervision help us recognize these prejudgments so that we can get beyond our negative feelings and learn to either care about the client or refer the client to someone else.

Getting Help with Mentally Ill Clients

We will probably encounter emotionally disturbed people in our practices, and they will respond to us and our work differently than will other clients. We may be baffled by their behavior or be insensitive to their fears. Or we may not know how to take care of ourselves when we are working with them. A consultant trained in psychological dynamics is a valuable resource for helping us identify and figure out what to do with clients who may be mentally ill.

Clients with mental illness can make complaints or feel harmed even when practitioners are ethical and careful. As caring practitioners, we may want to help a client who appears to be floundering. Yet some people who are mentally ill can exhibit extreme helplessness on the one hand and rage on the other. We may be ill-fatedly drawn to try to rescue a seemingly helpless client, only to wind up as the recipient of that person's anger. For our own protection, we need help identifying mental illness.

Although it is not our place to make a specific diagnosis, we do want to know whether a client is mentally ill for his or her protection as well as our own. For example, people with a mental illness generally don't have the interior strength to weather a process that can strip away defenses, such as emotionally oriented work. Ordinary folks seek out that kind of work to experience a deeper part of themselves. For disturbed people, who may feel blank or chaotic behind their social exterior, such work can be uncomfortable and disorienting. An experienced consultant or supervisor can help us identify signs of mental illness and judge whether our work will be beneficial to the prospective client. Of course, if the client is being treated by a mental health professional, we should obtain written permission from the client to speak with the other professional to make sure our work will be helpful to the client.

Supporting Our Intuition

Many manual therapists use their intuition to understand how best to work with clients. Intuition is a useful gift, but sometimes it fails us. Sometimes clients slip beneath the radar of our intuition, or we need more information to be able to understand them. We may misread them and fail to offer the kind of support they need. A consultant or supervisor could help us see the

reasons we didn't understand the client and educate us about how best to use our intuitive side.

And the #1 Reason for Getting Consultation or Supervision

Perhaps it's a little late to say this, but good boundaries can't be entirely learned from reading a book. We have to experience them. We need to experience the safety of working with someone who is clear and careful with boundaries. We have to get the solid feeling of good boundaries inside us.

A book can give us an idea of why it's important to be professional, but we can't learn it all from a book. Some may have had a teacher along the way who was careless or uneducated about relationship issues, and we need a remedial experience. If we aspire to a high level of professionalism, we need the good modeling that a compassionate professional trained in transference and countertransference can provide.

Finding Help and Support

For manual therapists, getting help with the relationship aspect of our work and coming together to support each other are still new concepts. Certainly, practitioners get together informally with friends who are also bodyworkers to encourage each other and talk about common issues. However, more organized ways of meeting together are still not that widely practiced. But casual sharing, aside from the possibility of leading to violations of confidentiality, doesn't always offer the depth of support and insight that we need. Fortunately, practitioners can now find and create other ways to enrich their professional lives.

Choosing a Consultant or Supervisor

Because getting consultations and supervision for the relationship issues of this work is a fairly new idea, you will have to be creative in finding someone with whom to work. The practitioner you choose should be someone who is trained in psychological dynamics and understands and appreciates bodywork and massage. A psychiatric social worker, psychologist, or other mental health professional who has never experienced bodywork may not be able to understand the intimacy of the work and the problems involved. Your consultant or supervisor should also respect the profession and be aware that manual therapists perform a valuable service for the community.

You can also work with a bodyworker or massage therapist who has training and experience in relationship dynamics. Although that would be ideal, few manual practitioners have such training.

No set way exists to find someone who will suit you. You can ask others for the names of good psychotherapists in your community and see if they would

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be interested in working with you. They have to understand that you don't want personal counseling, and they need to know the difference between consulting about work issues and doing psychotherapy. Not all psychotherapists have the experience or the inclination to do this kind of consulting.

Because you are hoping to learn more about good relationship boundaries, it should be obvious that your consultant or supervisor needs to be someone with whom you don't have another relationship.

Keep in mind that because the consultant or supervisor doesn't need to see your hands-on work, supervision and consultation can occur by phone. If you live in a small town, you may choose to have telephone appointments with an out-of-town consultant who does not know your clients.

When you are trying out a supervisor or consultant, you want to notice if this is someone who helps you trust your own intuition, who can suggest new choices without making you feel judged, who is enthusiastic about your work, and who helps you feel more confident. You want someone who gives you the feeling that you have a new ally, that you have someone in your corner.

Forming a Peer Group

While in school, many students form close bonds with other students but do not keep in touch once they have graduated. Once out in their practices, massage therapists and bodyworkers don't always have an awareness of how crucial it is to their professional health to stay in touch with colleagues.

To start a group, you have to round up some colleagues who would like to get together regularly to share experiences. An ideal number would be between four and twelve participants. It's a good idea to ask members to commit to meeting on a regular schedule for a certain length of time—perhaps once or twice a month for at least six meetings—to give the group a chance to gel.

Groups need to adhere to rules of confidentiality in agreeing not to talk outside the group about what other members say there. Also, members should agree to make every effort to disguise the identity of clients they are discussing.

It's a good idea if group members agree to other ground rules as well, such as not offering advice unless they are asked to or not interrupting others. Care should be taken to give each member a chance to bring their issues to the group. Although a small amount of venting can be useful, groups shouldn't be allowed to deteriorate into gripe sessions.

It's important that groups state their intentions clearly from the beginning, for instance, that they're interested in learning from each other and wanting to grow as professionals.

A Word About Mentoring

With mentoring, you make an agreement with a more experienced colleague that she or he will be available to answer your questions. It can be an

informal arrangement and is often unpaid. It may be as simple as, “Let me take you to lunch and get the benefit of your years as a bodyworker.” Everyone graduating from manual therapy training needs mentors. It should be a given that we all need help and support to start a practice.

Mentoring usually addresses less complex issues than supervision does. It’s good for business-building and practice-building kinds of questions, such as the value of using an answering service or the pros and cons of working out of your home.

A mentor can be any practitioner you respect, whose work is similar to yours and who is willing to meet with you to share his or her experiences.

These days, it’s even possible to find excellent mentoring on an online forum for massage therapists or bodyworkers. On such forums, there are hundreds of massage therapists and bodyworkers with varying levels of experience. Participants can ask questions that they would ask a mentor and receive a wide range of advice. The obvious disadvantage of this method is that there isn’t the face-to-face relationship that can provide ongoing encouragement and support, and you don’t necessarily know the qualifications of the people responding.

Taking Care of Ourselves

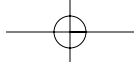
To forestall burnout, somatic practitioners need to learn how to take good care of themselves, which means getting help from others. Sharing with someone else what really goes on in our offices, what pushes our buttons, and when our hearts get shut down is crucial to the health of our practices.

The work we do is complex and demanding. Consultations, supervision, peer support, and mentoring can take away the isolation and depletion that can kill our interest in our work. Our professional lives are more rewarding when we find ways to keep our interest alive and be kinder to ourselves.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 If you are a student, what steps can you take when you finish your training to make sure you have the support and information you need? If you are already practicing, do you have enough support to keep you excited and encouraged about your work? Do you have any resources to help you sort out the therapeutic relationship aspect of your work? What steps could you take to make sure you have enough support and resources?

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- 2** How do you feel about the idea of going to someone for supervision or consultation? What would be the pros and cons for you personally?
- 3** Are there areas where you could benefit from help—for instance, setting limits, working with women who have been sexually abused, or knowing how to work with an emotionally fragile client? What are the areas that are the most challenging for you? What can you do to help you feel more confident about these areas?
- 4** If you are already practicing, can you think of a time when a problem with a client would have gone much smoothly if you had had outside professional help with it? How would you handle that situation now?

