

6.2 SUPERVISING PEERS: SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION

READ MORE: COUNTERTRANSFERENCE

Recognizing and Addressing Countertransference

The supportive supervisor can help peers examine feelings that could affect their reactions or perceptions towards clients. This is one of the key objectives of supportive and clinical supervision alike. **Countertransference**, feelings that a peer has toward the client, regularly occurs, and it is important for the peer to understand that feelings that they have toward the client—positive, negative, and at times both—are normal. These feelings can help a peer recognize and understand his or her own reactions as well as what a client might be experiencing. Peers benefit from being regularly reminded not to become personally frustrated or disappointed about issues or concerns that their clients may have, or not to have unrealistic expectations, but rather to be open to understanding where the client is in his or her life at that moment.

In some cases, peers unconsciously take on the task of trying to “fix” their clients, because they feel they may be at a healthier place in their own lives. As a result, they take on the responsibility of making their clients “better” according to their view of better. This can create a situation where the client no longer takes responsibility for his or her own behavior and in fact, becomes dependent upon the peer in an unhealthy way. Administrative supervisors can use the assistance of clinical or supportive supervisors in helping the peer manage countertransference and foster a productive relationship with the client.

Recognizing and Addressing Countertransference

Countertransference may be occurring if one or more of the following is true:

- Belief of exactly what a client needs to do
- Assumptions about a client without checking them out with her or him
- Going out of the way for a client, over-extending oneself even though client is not working very hard for him- or herself.
- Avoiding a client(s)
- Feeling of being manipulated
- Ignoring or forgetting boundaries or the boundaries that have been set by the organization
- Spending too much time with one client for an extended period of time
- Attraction to a client
- Unrealistic expectations of a client
- Client reminds peer of someone in the peer’s personal life
- Worrying about a client(s) excessively
- Beginning to use client for own stress relief
- Feeling confused about the peer role with a client(s)
- Feeling angry, sad or judgmental about a client(s) much of the time
- Being late consistently with a client
- While meeting with a client, an intense feeling suddenly arises—anger, sadness, or any other feeling, even a “positive” one. The feeling distracts from a normal ability to listen well.

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We just had a countertransference issue recently. One of our peers went out to visit a positive woman who had a stroke and she's homebound, and she's about to get evicted. The peer had been through that same experience, so she came back to the office and was very upset. We had another example where we had to involve the child protective services, and the peer who had to make the call had her children taken away at one point.

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How to address countertransference?

Encourage and advise peers to:

- Consider feelings about the client(s) that trigger these feelings or reactions. Use supervision as a place to discuss this.
- Consider the possibility of over-identifying with client (perhaps there are some similarities that trigger feelings). Sometimes these similarities are hard to acknowledge.
- Talk to a trusted colleague, supervisor, counselor, or other supportive person.
- Engage in a stress-reduction technique of any sort.
- Reassess boundaries with a client(s).
- Consider spending more or less energy on this person(s)
- Question assumptions.
- Remember limits.
- Remember that supporting clients does not always have ideal outcomes
- Remember that the peer role is not to fix people—people are ultimately responsible for themselves.
- Get help if needed.
- Get supportive feedback
- Remember that the most important job is to role model self-care

This “Read More” section accompanies [Section 6.2 Supervising Peers: Supportive Supervision](#), part of the online toolkit, *Building Blocks to Peer Program Success*. For more information, visit http://www.hdwg.org/peer_program/program_dev.