REMOTE SUPERVISION IN SOCIAL WORK

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SUPERVISION DURING A PANDEMIC

The ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE series has been designed for practitioners and practice managers who are negotiating new work processes through using online and tele-communication platforms. This tool provides guidance on remote supervision practices. **Please note that this series is not intended to replace any organisational, regulatory, legal or data protection frameworks.** Social workers should adhere to their professional codes of conduct and codes of ethics, contracts of employment, and the policies, procedures and guidelines of their organisations.

Social distancing have been introduced as a protection measure against the disease, while social workers are continuing to deliver services as essential frontline workers. In addition to managing the emotional distress from witnessing the health and social impacts of the disease, social workers are trying to manage the risk of contracting the virus, performing work and caring roles, home-schooling, and we continue to be involved in community and voluntary work. Social workers live with uncertainty in their daily practice. While this experience may be helpful in dealing with the societal and global uncertainties that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners continue to have support needs and supervision requirements, irrespective of whether staff are based in offices or in remote locations. In a blogpost on *The New Social Worker*, Danna Bodenheimer (2020) writes, 'There is literally no way to be navigating this moment in time without a broken heart.' Self-care and caring for each other have never been more important. Flexibility, mutuality and compassion are crucial. As the Irish saying goes,

'Ar scath a chéile, a mhairimid.'

[We rely on each other for shelter]
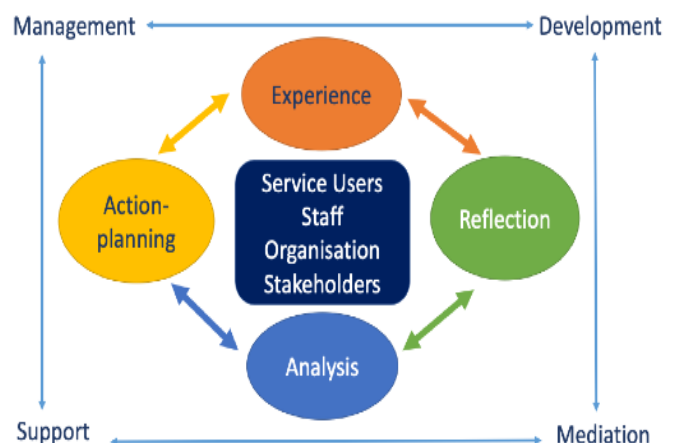
ONLINE SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION

Social workers are required to proactively ensure they receive appropriate supervision, support and assistance in order to achieve a consistently high standard of practice (see IASW, CORU). In addition to individual supervision, many organisations offer a range of supervisory spaces to practitioners including peer review, group supervision, case study discussions and journal clubs.

The use of technology for supervision purposes has increased since COVID-19 with video-conferencing, telephone and e-communication tools being the most commonly used. A variety of communication and collaboration platforms are available to enable online supervision including Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, FaceTime, Zoom, Google Meet and Whatsapp. A comprehensive analysis of the security features of these platforms can be reviewed here. Decisions about endorsing the introduction of online supervision, and deciding which platforms to use should be made at agency-level. The standards applied to face-to-face supervision still apply to technology-assisted supervision, although there are key differences which we will examine in this tool. The use of online communication platforms should be approved by your agency, with the privacy of all parties and stakeholders (especially service-users) protected at all times. Best practice requires strict adherence to GDPR regulations.

INTEGRATED MODEL OF SUPERVISION

Morrison's (2005) widely-used model of supervision has four functions: managerial (ensuring competent accountable performance), developmental (formative / professional development), personal support and mediation between the worker and the organisation. This model has been further developed to integrate reflective practice and to ensure recognition of key stakeholders (services users, staff, partners and organisations) as the foundations of supervision. This integrated model of supervision is known as the 4x4x4 model (Wonnacott, 2012), and is equally applicable to remote supervision:

SUPERVISION NEEDS

The supervision needs of social workers and social work managers changes over time, depending on their specific roles and responsibilities. As staff become more experienced and their relationship with their supervisor grows, they generally become more autonomous and the managerial function may become increasingly collaborative. The changes that have occurred since the COVID-19 epidemic began, have changed the landscape for social work practice. Managers, supervisors and practitioners are trying to adapt from long-held customs and supervision practices, to a mix of office, community and remote work (telephone and online platforms). This means that the traditional assumption that more-experienced, advanced practitioners and managers guide and support novice workers may be harder to maintain. Flexibility, understanding and solidarity are key principles which should inform how we co-create safer and supportive spaces for meaningful supervision:

Shohet & Hawkins' (1989) Description of Professional Progression	Novice	Journeyman	Craftsman	Expert
TUSLA's (2016) Description of Professional Progression	Entry Level (0-2 yrs)	Intermediate Level (2-5 yrs)	Advanced Level (5+ yrs)	
Supervision Requirement Pre COVID-19	Dependent on Supervision	Fluctuates between dependence and autonomy Over-confidence vs. overwhelmed	Increased professional confidence Professionally autonomous Supervision is more collaborative	
Requirements for Online Supervision During COVID-19 Pandemic	Dependent on Supervision	Increased Dependence	More guidance may be needed	
	An increased need for supervision as a stabilising force where emotional empathy, validity, encouragement and mutual collaboration can create a supportive space for professional progress			

While the premise of online supervision is similar to in-person supervision, there are some differences. Moving to online supervision is an opportunity to re-visit the supervisory contract between supervisor and practitioner to reiterate mutual priorities and expectations in this new virtual space. Both participants' expectations should be discussed, clarified and agreement reached about the following issues: frequency and scheduling; duration and format; record-keeping - supervision notes and notes for the case file; agenda-setting and preparedness; developing online skills; privacy and confidentiality, especially when supervision takes place in non-agency buildings; contingency plans for Internet and platform problems; blended approaches (mix of phone, face-to-face and online platforms); writing and sharing of supervision records; running and attending remote group supervision sessions; and agreement on the use of the recording function in platforms such as Microsoft Teams.

PRACTICE TIPS: EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN REMOTE SUPERVISION

1. **Be genuine.** When using new forms of communication we do not become experts overnight. It is okay to acknowledge that communicating in new ways can be a steep learning curve for everyone.

2. **Setting the agenda in advance can be helpful.** Agree an agenda by email / collaboration platform in advance. At the outset of the supervision meeting, make a contingency plan in case of connectivity breakdowns. Use the "out of office" / automatic reply feature in your email programme to leave others know that your are in supervision and are not to be disturbed.

3. **Be patient.** Transmission delays can be a feature of online video-conferencing and can provide unwanted and awkward intervals that can impede communication.

4. **Active-listening is really important in supervision.** Listening skills are conveyed by being attentive to the speaker and therefore our body language becomes even more important when using online video platforms. See our *Communicating and Building Rapport Online* tool for further guidance.

5. **Avoiding distractions** is key to remaining 'present' during e-communication and engagement. If practicable, turn off mobiles, social media and email. Create a quiet space where interruptions can be minimised. The lack of distractions and interruptions that happen in a regular office may be a positive of remote supervision.

6. **File notes, reports and policy documents can be shared on the screen** on many platforms (advice on how to share your screen in Microsoft Teams), which allows for contemporaneous editing and shared inputs on Microsoft Word documents like supervision records. When undertaking supervision remotely, using the files feature in the chat function of collaboration services like Microsoft Teams can help keep electronic documents more secure as they are stored on the organisation's tenancy; however, this is not permitted in some agencies. Read the Data Protection Commission's guidance on *Protecting Personal Data When Working Remotely*.

7. **Confidentiality and privacy.** When participating in remote supervision (telephone or online) in a home environment, it is crucial to respect service users' confidentiality and the privacy of all parties. The blur background feature in video calls can improve privacy. Using headphones and ensuring that your screen is shielded from others, are essential. Ensure that all paper records are securely stored. The saving of supervision and related records in encrypted, agency-approved cloud storage services like OneDrive or Microsoft Teams may help avoid data breaches in a remote environment, but check that these are permitted by your agency. Make sure you logout of your PC, lock the screen and ensure your device is up-to-date, and don't allow family members to use work devices. It is essential to check your agency's policies before using these services and don't use unapproved platforms / software for sensitive work like professional supervision. Further advice can be found in the Data Protection Commission's *Data Protection Tips for Video-conferencing* and *Staying Safe Online During a Pandemic*.

PRACTICE TIPS: MANAGING BOUNDARIES

We recommend that practitioners and supervisors attend to boundary maintenance when entering into online supervision. Many social workers maintain personal social media accounts and can be connected with colleagues, services and managers on platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter. It is important to stress that clear distinctions should be made between formal remote supervision discussions and personal conversations between colleagues. Service-users' information or circumstances should never be discussed with a supervisor or colleague on social media platforms (see BASW Social Media Policy, 2018).

Other boundary issues that should be discussed include: agreeing a framework to manage informal check-ins, online office hours, leave arrangements, managing disruptions and interruptions, and how to contact managers for emergency case discussions.
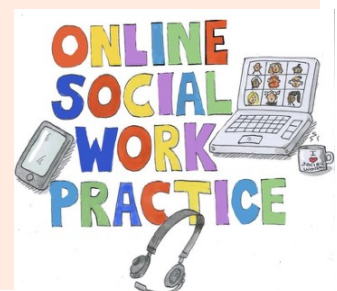
ADVICE FOR SUPERVISORS

Your approach to online supervision can offer a stabilising force for supervisee's in this COVID-19 period. Soften your overall approach during online supervision. For example, allow for sessions to proceed at a slower pace than in-person sessions as online meetings can be tiring. Your tone of voice and eye contact are important. Emotionally engage with your supervisee's experiences. Validate their opinions while encouraging further reflection. Identify achievements and areas for improvement. Recognise challenges and acknowledge professional progress. Anticipate the supervisee's needs between sessions, manage your expectations and make sure workers take rest time. Key questions to consider: what are the pros and cons of phone vs remote supervision using video-conferencing software? What are your training needs to facilitate your adaptation to remote supervision? What might remote supervision through a platform like Microsoft Teams add or detract from the quality of your supervision? What agency policies support the provision of remote supervision? You may need to weave relevant agency policies into your supervision sessions and make relevant updates to the supervision contract. For example, some platforms automatically record the session: agreeing on turning off recording devices may become a regular feature of induction to remote supervision and supervision contracts. What additional planning and mentoring is required to run a remote group supervision session? Additional time may need to be allocated to the personal support and developmental functions of supervision to help process supervisee's adaptation to, and emerging practicing issues associated with, remote practice, as well as managing anxieties around COVID-19, as well as personal and family health considerations.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR SUPERVISEES

Your approach to online supervision can help to support your professional development and well-being. An honest, open and willing approach to critical reflection is even more important in a context of remote social work practice. Your commitment to inquiring into your professional judgment, decision-making and the quality of your work during online supervision will demonstrate your accountability and ethical-sensibility. Be open to receiving constructive feedback and to seeking advice. Ask questions, seek guidance and think about how remote supervision using platforms like Microsoft Teams may require changes in your communication style and planning. Be honest with your supervisor: if phone contact works best for you as it is less tiring, you should share this preference. Remember that your supervisor will be working with and supporting other practitioners also: both of you will need rest periods as remote working using online platforms can be tiring (click here for an article that explains 'Zoom Fatigue').

ADDITIONAL READING

CORU (2019) *Social Workers Registration Board Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics.*

SCIE (2017) *Effective Supervision in a Variety of Settings*.

Tusla, Child and Family Agency (2016) *Proficiencies Reflection Guide for Social Workers and Social Care Workers.*

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE series was created by Dr Kenneth Burns and Dr Fiachra O'Súilleabháin, School of Applied Social Studies (@UCCsocialwork), University College Cork, Ireland.

The full series of resources are available on our Padlet with free resources and information on online meeting platforms, practice advice, GDPR (data protection), self-care, etc. The Padlet is open access and anyone can contribute links and resources. Original artwork by Harry Venning.

TOOL 5, VERSION 1.1

Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, BURNS AND McCAUGHREN (2020)