

## Love and Loss in Supervision

**Anon**

*In this article the author, who wishes to be anonymous, explores the presence of love in supervision and the importance of being able to be vulnerable to enable the love to emerge and flourish. Her very personal account includes the ending of a long-time supervisory relationship, and the feelings of loss when that happened.*

Love and loss are intrinsic parts of our most intimate human relationships, and the supervisory relationship is no exception. For Jampolsky (2011), love is simply ‘letting go of fear’. He sees love as our natural state or true nature, simply blocked by our own defensive barriers. This view of love suggests that love will arise in relationships where we can let go of fear, where we can dare to be truly vulnerable, in the safety of a trusting, non-judgemental space. In accordance with this view, I see love being an important and integral feature of relational supervision. I believe that love will invariably arise over time, in the intimacy of our most trusting and treasured supervisory relationships; where both parties are able to come fully into view – undefended in a bond of mutual care, trust, respect and engagement.

This article is a personal reflection on the presence of love in the supervisory relationship. It will explore the significance of love within supervision, and the eventual loss this will bring. It was written to honour a most treasured supervisory relationship.

Over the past seven years, I have been fortunate to experience a range of supervisors from varying modalities, with whom I have learnt so much. Yet, only with one have I experienced a depth of connection that precipitated love, and this supervisory relationship undoubtedly facilitated my greatest learning. I often wonder what made this relationship unique. On reflection, I realise, it was the only supervisory relationship in which I felt completely safe; where I experienced an unwavering sense of trust and safety, of unconditional acceptance and understanding. It was the only relationship in which I allowed myself to be truly vulnerable; to fully enter the relationship, to be seen without fear of judgement, blame or criticism.

### **Vulnerability**

My capacity to be vulnerable with this supervisor allowed me to be fully congruent – freely expressing my thoughts and feelings, bringing all of me into view. With her, I could risk vulnerability time and time again; finding the courage to let go of fear, or act in spite of it.

From the beginning, despite my own trepidation and fear at the prospect of seeing clients for the first time, the supervisory relationship felt authentic, trustworthy and safe. The sense of safety she provided emboldened me to be open with her; to share clumsy or difficult experiences; to talk about mistakes, regrets, embarrassments, to acknowledge learning edges, stuck-ness with clients, frustration or worry, to share achievements, and at times simply allow my tears to fall. I spoke of various struggles, e.g. sitting in silence, my anxiety in working with suicidal clients, and the personal heart-break of losing my nan etc. Each instance was met with non-judgemental acceptance, understanding and compassion, and I felt met, seen and most tenderly held.

My underlying shyness and lingering sense of shame, along with the early repeated parental message 'Don't Trust Anyone', certainly shaped my propensity to trust. However, my complete trust in her allowed me to be vulnerable, gradually enabling all my defensive barriers to dissolve. I fully accept that 'Being vulnerable only happens when you trust completely' (Urban dictionary).

It seems unsurprising, therefore, that vulnerability is considered by many to be fundamental to the cultivation of love. I agree that:

We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honour the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection. Love is not something we give or get; it is something we nurture and grow. (Brown, 2012, p. 105)

I believe that one's capacity to be vulnerable is the basis of all meaningful relationships, and is the cornerstone of the supervisory relationship. I wholeheartedly believe that helping to create a feeling of safety and thus allowing space for vulnerability are fundamental to the task of supervision. For me, feeling consistently valued and understood is essential to this process. I fully agree that:

The task of the supervisor is to help the supervisee feel, received, valued, understood on the assumption that only then will they feel safe

and open enough to review and challenge himself, as well as to value himself and his own abilities. (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012, p. 52)

## Core Conditions

Without a doubt, my capacity to be vulnerable with this supervisor, above all others, was in large part due to her unwavering embodiment of Carl Rogers' Core Conditions. She was congruent, honest and authentic, so empathically attuned, and always unconditionally accepting of me. Her gift of empathic attunement was the key to dissolving my defences, allowing me to be fully seen. I fully agree with the following conclusions: 'A supervisee's experience of being empathically understood and unconditionally accepted is perhaps the single most important factor in effective supervision... a supervisee will benefit to the degree that he experiences himself as fully received'. (Tudor & Worrall, 2004, p. 24)

From the early days of supervision, I intuitively knew that this supervisory relationship was solid, and I therefore knew it was safe to express anything; to vent, disagree or challenge, always bouncing back to the security and solidity of the core conditions. I realised that this relationship, and particularly her secure base and lack of defence, could weather and withstand all ruptures, allowing a healthy space for challenge and disagreement, creating a fertile ground for personal and professional growth.

In hindsight, no one had ever stepped this closely into my world. For me, this relationship illuminated the power of person-centred values, and their intractable link to relational depth; to intimacy, tenderness and care. Whilst our supervisory relationship was very much rooted in its person-centred foundations, it was deepened exponentially by compatibility; by similarity; and most definitely by humour.

## Inevitability of Love

Over time, in the closeness of the supervisory relationship, a mutual care and respect gradually evolved to love. On reflection, given the nature and

context of relational supervision, this is not surprising.

Relational supervision requires intimacy; it thrives in a climate of openness and transparency, where both parties can bring themselves fully into view; to be seen and challenged by each other. Essential to this work is mutual liking, a bond of trust, respect, engagement, and a safe holding space. Over time, the dynamic of interdependence, mutuality and reciprocity, that is so central to this work, brings us ever closer, as we are changed, shaped and re-shaped by each other in this process.

Furthermore, great supervision also brings countless feel-good outcomes, including an endless source of support, reassurance, encouragement, inspiration and challenge. It enables us to process the turbulence and difficulties encountered in therapeutic relationships and leave replenished and recharged, our equilibrium restored.

Certainly, at times of my greatest struggles and personal challenges, I felt most tenderly held, within the valuable holding container of supervision. Amidst the above conditions, in this deeply relational way of working, a depth of connection and care is inevitable, and if we are seen, understood, prized and able to risk vulnerability, time and time again, love will arise. After all, how can we be truly seen, without the presence of love? 'Love gives us the courage to be seen.' (Holden, 2013, p. 100)

Over the years, I have had some wonderful supervisors, from all modalities and with whom I have learnt so much. Yet, I realise that in all these relationships except one, I remained partially hidden; retaining some semblance of my familiar defences. The absence of complete trust in these supervisory relationships prevented me from fully 'letting go of fear' and my defensive barriers. Thus, in line with Jampolsky's view, the presence of love was blocked.

Only one supervisor provided a complete sense of safety; her embodiment of the core conditions and person-centred 'way of being' provided the safest and most freeing conditions for this work, gradually dissolving any defences I held. The depth of trust and care I experienced increased with each

year of supervision. Given the above conditions, along with a fundamental compatibility and close bond, love was the inevitable outcome.

Surely, if we accept the view that love is letting go of fear; that love is being unafraid, undefended, vulnerable, being fully seen and able to freely explore and challenge ourselves without fear, then surely 'love' in this context is an integral part of relational supervision.

## **Impact**

The presence of love in this supervisory relationship facilitated my greatest learning. It changed me both personally and professionally, and helped to deepen and enrich my work as both therapist and supervisor.

On a personal level, I have learnt that on those occasions when we are fully met by another, when we are both truly seen and understood, the illusion of separation disappears, and love is all that remains. It has confirmed to me that love is letting go of fear, and that love can facilitate our greatest work. It has also shown me that love will arise, over time, in our closest supervisory bonds.

Above all, it has highlighted the importance of connection and rapport, and the power of the core conditions in helping to create a tender, safe, holding space. It has shown me that only when we feel valued and completely safe can we allow all defences to fall. And only then can we freely explore and safely challenge ourselves, rather than defend against potential challenge or criticism. This knowledge guides everything I do in terms of my supervisory and therapeutic relationships, and remains at the heart of my practice.

All that was modelled and offered to me, I endeavour to convey in my practice, as both therapist and supervisor. In a reverse parallel process, I believe I am able to offer a comparable degree of care, acceptance and support for my clients and supervisees, facilitating a safe and trusting space, where they too can risk vulnerability. I endeavour to remain undefended

and consistently strive to embody the core conditions.

Without a doubt, I am now able to embody and express greater authenticity, warmth and tenderness in both therapeutic and supervisory relationships. My supervisor's gift of empathic understanding has fostered my own, enabling me to become more empathically attuned, more understanding, able to step ever-closer to clients and supervisees, facilitating deeper connections and trusting bonds, providing a safe space where clients and supervisees can take greater risks each time we meet.

I have learnt that the presence of love in the intimacy of relational supervision is not to be feared, but expected. I appreciate that whenever love does arise, in supervisory relationships and whatever form it may take, I believe that it warrants acknowledgement; to be discussed with respect and sensitivity, avoiding the potential to shame. It also necessitates an exploration of the type of love that is emerging, and perhaps to distinguish between the types of love, as suggested by the Greeks: *storge* or kinship, *philia* or friendship, *eros*/ sexual and romantic love or divine love known as *agape*. It is an opportunity to enquire into what is going on, or what may be being played out, the qualities that we are drawn towards, perhaps mirroring our own, and/or those qualities lacking in ourselves or other significant relationships. Whilst love can undoubtedly strengthen the supervisory relationship and enhance the work, it is important to acknowledge and to enquire into whether it gets in the way of the work.

## Loss

My decision to end supervision came in the wake of my supervisor's recovery from serious illness. During her illness, I was rocked by the realisation that she could die. As her supervisee, I was bound to an ethical code that prohibits personal contact, so I simply waited for news. It was an unbearable wait. I knew then that I could not endure a possible repeat of this; to be bound to an ethical code of no contact, irrespective of life and death

circumstances. So shortly after her recovery, I decided to end the supervisory relationship.

The end of this treasured supervisory relationship has been a profound loss. I have questioned my decision to end the supervisory relationship many times. I miss the relationship and I miss her. I am grieving the loss of a unique relationship and all that it meant. Despite this sadness, I take with me my greatest learning experience to date.

I am aware that my experience of love and loss in supervision is far from unique. Love will continue to arise, time and time again, in the intimacy of deeply relational supervision. It will recur ad infinitum, and loss will be the inevitable and unavoidable outcome. Perhaps, it is time to break the taboo and to talk about the presence of love in the very best of supervisory relationships, and the eventual loss this will bring.

## Conclusion

I am eternally grateful to my remarkable supervisor, for her unwavering care and support over the years, and for the experience of such a rare and profound connection. Without a doubt, she has shaped me, as a person and practitioner, and facilitated my greatest learning. All that I have learnt, I will treasure and endeavour to carry forward. Thank you.

I believe that exceptional supervisory relationships provide us with a profound experience of love and loss, and a partial glimpse of something so exquisite, they are forever treasured. To enter this relationship fully, and to be met in equal measure, are to experience our greatest learning in terms of personal and professional growth. Sadly, the eventual endings of these unique relationships will invariably bring profound loss.

This article is to honour all supervisors who assist supervisees in their greatest learning by enabling them to risk vulnerability, by providing a safe, supportive space, characterised by care and understanding. It is in acknowledgement of gifted supervisors who bring all of themselves into this relationship, who are aware of the all-importance of connection in this work and do not step back

from it, or hide behind a professional façade. It is for those who are secure and undefended, who can acknowledge and discuss the love that may arise in the supervisory relationship whilst maintaining professional boundaries. It is for those that understand that love is a natural part of this unique relationship.

### **Anonymity**

This article is a deeply personal account of love and loss in supervision. It is a personal reflection, rather an academic paper – thus its conclusions are simply my experiences and observations. My decision to retain anonymity reflects the personal nature of this work, and also respects the confidentiality and anonymity of all the supervisors with whom I have worked.

### **References**

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### **About the contributor**

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