counselling the counsellors

To whom should a bereavement counsellor turn for help, advice, support and comfort and for an opportunity to reflect on his or her work with the bereaved? How can a Cruse counsellor develop his skills and improve his knowledge of the processes of bereavement and the many forms that grief can take? Cruse is committed to achieving the highest standards of counselling widows and widowers and their children. In this issue we open the debate on how best to achieve this aim with a paper on Supervision by GILLIAN PARKER. Like all skills, the skills of supervision can be analysed and learned. The personal qualities which go towards making a good supervisor are more intangible but include being a good listener, reliability, integrity, sensitivity and the ability to enhance self esteem whilst steering in the right direction. Where can Cruse recruit supervisors with the requisite knowledge, skills, experience and personality? Fortunately the caring professions (medicine, especially psychiatry, social work, psychotherapy, psychology, nursing and marriage guidance) also require the work of their trainees to be supervised.

Many senior members of these professions are already involved with Cruse branches and others can be approached to help with the specific task of supervision. If they can, these already busy people, will gladly give their time to charitable causes. If circumstances do not allow them to be generous, then we should be prepared to raise money to pay for expert supervision for our counsellors, for surely nothing less than the best supervision is good enough for Cruse counsellors if they are to give their best to our members?

Let us define some of these terms -

LISTENING: The power of this seemingly simple - but too little used - skill has become increasingly apparent. Supervisors are themselves frequently baffled by counsellors who thank them profusely for their help - when the counsellor has actually done all the work of sorting out the problem. The act of listening can make possible a quality of clarity and thought which enables another human to bring his full experience to bear on the issue that troubles him.

REFLECTING: "Active listening" may involve the supervisor's "mirroring" of the counsellor's ideas so that the counsellor views his own thoughts more freshly and objectively. Phrases like, "You seem to be saying...", "let me see if I understand..." may signal this kind of supervisor behaviour.

CLARIFYING: The supervisor may go further by rephrasing some of the counsellor's comments so that the issue is stated more sharply and precisely. Here the introductory phrases might be, "You seem to be saying that..." or "Is this what you meant?"

CONFIRMING AND APPROVING: One of the most important functions of the supervisor is to reassure the counsellor when his perception of the situation and his response to the bereaved has been caring, and has sounded 'right'. Out of this confirmation and approval the counsellor develops a confidence in work that is based on wise assessment. This also merits validation. . . "I really liked the way you replied."

INTERPRETING: One step beyond confirming is the interpretation of what the counsellor may mean. Here the supervisor tries to express what may lie beneath the words themselves - or to put together the implications of several statements. It is expressing what may be the counsellor's intentions clearly, but without evaluation.

PROBING: Here the supervisor may, through questions, direct the counsellor's attention to aspects of his experience which he has not expressed as yet. This supervisor behaviour again assumes that the counsellor has within him the basic elements necessary to solve problems. The supervisor's function, therefore is to bring this experience into better focus.

PROVIDING NEW DATA: At this point the supervisor begins to add ideas and information which are not in the counsellor's direct experience. It may be data about new dimensions of the problem or its context. It may be information which the supervisor has collected through experience or reading. The supervisor's goal is clearly to expand the counsellor's knowledge and view of the issues at stake and the boundaries within which those issues must be resolved.

For instance, a counsellor and supervisor are discussing the counsellor's last visit to Mr. B, a quiet widower who during his wife's terminal illness acted as a wonderful support to his wife and to the staff looking after her.

In this session he had started to go over the last days again. His wife was a vital, energetic



Listens
Reflects
(Clarifies and inter-
(prets implications
Confirms and approves
Probes
Gathers data
Re-labels
Adds new data
Identifies options
Proposes criteria
Recommends
Prescribes
Plans implementation
Models
Teaches
Follows up
Gives extra time or support

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person who had to face death. Unlike other occasions, this time Mr. B faced feelings of anguish which then led on to rage that no-one had really helped his wife's emotional pain, grieving for the loved ones she had to leave behind and for her unfinished work.

The counsellor stayed with Mr. B through the tirade, and then when he was calmer, left, secretly feeling rather shattered. This she told her supervisor. After confirming that the counsellor had contained the situation, and that this had been very important, the supervisor could take up the anguish of the couple and refer to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross - "To Live until we say Goodbye". She could also point out that Mr. B was reflecting in the counselling session the very anguish and anger that he had originally experienced as his dying wife's feelings. She could draw on her own experience and the literature to describe the process whereby the bereaved have gradually to accept their own anger at being left, and point out the emotional defences which protect the bereaved when the experience is too painful. Here, for instance, the widower had temporarily identified with his wife rather than to feel angry at her. Within an ambience of confirmation and support, the new data can help the counsellor to feel confident to continue the good work of this particular session.

IDENTIFYING OPTIONS FOR ACTION: Once the problem is clear - whether clarified by supervisor or counsellor - the task is to bring into focus the range of actions open to the counsellor. It is the time when a supervisor might say, as crisply as possible, "It seems you have the choice of doing this...or this... or this". One of the supervisor's most valuable contributions is often to expand the range of alternatives which a counsellor considers. Here is one point where quite clearly, 'two heads are better than one'. The supervisor recognises the factor of extra strain which a counsellor may have to manage. For instance, he or she is - a beginner, same sex and age as the bereaved or in a similar family constellation. The supervisor may also realise that some fear or loss in the counsellor's personal experience or family is reactivated by the bereaved's loss, or there has been cumulative strain of working for years with many bereaved people. Personal changes in health, work or key relationships also need to be watched. There can also be stress in the actual supervisory relationship. The supervisor is an "authority" figure, and counsellors without realizing it may transfer on to this figure many feelings about being junior, dependant, finding they try "too hard" to please, or feel rebellious.

Learning is painful, it implies change and makes for anxiety. The reactions mentioned are at times necessary defences until a basic trust in the relationship has been established. Here the aim of the supervision will be to establish a sufficiently open relationship to allow free enough discussion of these matters. The development of greater self awareness in their work helps both counsellor and supervisor. However, it must be emphasised that supervision is not therapy. The aim is to help counsellors in the task to increase skills and to help them to be more effective. The frame of reference is the work with the bereaved. Supervision time is to help each individual become a better counsellor, not to undermine confidence by probing the personal and intimate affairs of the counsellor.

Monthly group meetings allow counsellors to share their work and learn from each other. New counsellors are helped by individual contact about twice a month. Supervisors, through their own counselling work, can bring interesting problems and ways of solving them as models to be explored. Equally, the supervisor can gradually collect from the counsellors' group overall information about the scope of work, types of problems and solutions, to inform the regional figures so that new training schemes, refresher courses and symposia can be planned. Finally, supervisors themselves need discussion groups and opportunities to meet on a regional basis to discuss aspects of their work and the basic training schemes.

SUMMARY: Possible uses for this model:

1. There is no single "right" way to help another person understand a situation and solve a problem. There is a time to listen and a time to prescribe; a time to probe and a time to recommend.
2. In assessing the best way to supervise the work of a counsellor, the supervisor might ask questions like -

a) What is the best mix of our joint experience and knowledge as supervisor and counsellor?

b) Does the counsellor expect me to be doing something different, and does the counsellor appreciate why I am functioning as I am?

c) Do I have a consistent tendency to use one style too often - what does this tell me about myself?

d) Does my work with Cruse counsellors bring to them containment, support and knowledge so that they have confidence in their own skills and healing potential and remain sensitive, helpful and resourceful people?

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G.P.