SUPERVISION: THE MISSING LINK

Research Synthesis From Three Remote Workshops

"The virtual space we shared felt like a very safe space to talk about how we felt and the emotional burden we have gone through without supervision. We were able to discuss and put it into that space in a very healthy way and I feel like our voices were heard."

– MHPSS professional from Iraq

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Psychosocial Centre
International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
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ANGLEMAP

Research Partners

Workshop Partners

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Research overview

30 locations | 33 organizations
39 participants | 2437 sticky notes

This research process aimed to gain an understanding of the range of experiences, best practices, challenges, ideas, and approaches among supervisors, supervisees, and other MHPSS and protection practitioners from a variety of backgrounds and contexts. These data, stories, and insights serve to inform the creation of the Integrated Model for Supervision, which aims to be a set of guidance and tools to promote and support supervision within MHPSS.

For this purpose, the **IFRC Psychosocial Centre** in collaboration with **Trinity College Dublin** and funding from **USAID** engaged **Anglemap** to design, plan, and facilitate three remote workshops on October 7, 14, and 15, 2020. Sessions lasted either 5 or 3 hours and were attended by an average of 13 participants and 5 facilitators each.

These workshops were carried out digitally using Zoom as the main conferencing and communication software and Miro as the digital whiteboard and collaboration space. In addition, notes and transcriptions were captured in Google Docs. The sessions included exercises and methods adapted from Design Thinking and Design Research practices such as pair interviews, clustering, insights, and journey mapping.

The following pages summarize the findings, insights, and conclusions synthesized from across all three workshops. They are organized into themes that emerged across all three sessions including exercises, templates, and plenary discussions. Illustrative verbatim examples are provided on digital sticky notes written by participants during the workshops.

Definitions of Supervision

Supervision is a broad term that encompasses a number of functions, tasks, and responsibilities. It was found that misunderstandings and mismatched expectations can occur when these functions are not clearly defined from the outset.

Supervisors sometimes find themselves switching roles between educating and teaching skills, coaching, monitoring quality of work and delivering staff support, and acknowledge that these roles may sometimes be at odds with one another.

The functions and definitions of supervision are often not clearly set out by organisations, which can lead to confusion over roles and responsibilities.

Definitions of supervision are not necessarily a matter of profession or background. Supervision in psychosocial areas have their own clear principles, as set out by a supervision agreement.

Supervision is different from mentorship or crisis intervention. It's about creating a safe space, not to be controlled or evaluated.

People think debriefing is same thing as supervission

Supervision has three parts - education (identification of needs, capacity building, refresher training etc), administrative (making sure they are following protocol and guidelines etc) and support ('having an open door policy')

What supervision means in different contexts differs; there are specialized services like counseling or therapy, and there is the humanitarian field. A lack of clarity here can lead to a mismatch in expectations and understanding.

Trust and Boundaries in a Supervision Relationship

Building trust takes time, and is achieved by clearly stating the terms and expectations of supervision and consistently sticking to them.

The most critical factors in building trust are the maintenance of confidentiality and the fostering of a safe space free of judgement.

A relatively informal relationship between supervisor and supervisee makes for easy communication and allows for openness. At the same time, professional boundaries need to be defined and maintained. However, ideas about appropriate professional boundaries can vary between cultures and so it is important to address this issue clearly in a supervision contract and within supervision itself.

Some participants expressed an expectation of supervisors to keep the technical aspects of the supervisee's work at the center of the session, and a desire to maintain boundaries of delving into more personal matters unless explicitly requested by the supervisee.

This view differs among participants who have experienced different types of supervision, ranging from purely technical support with cases from peers or managers in the field to highly personal sessions with external supervisors where the supervisee's own well-being is at the centre.

humility

Acceptance

Supervisor- active listening, confidentiality, paraphrasing- empathy- put yourself in the shoes of the supervisees- use silence as skill

Unconditional positive regard- being accepted the way you are

Sandwich approach , packaging criticisms in a better way, being calm as a supervisor can be mirrored by the supervisee

Silence to give participants chance to internalize- and to verbalize

Best Practices and Qualities of Supervisors

Supervisors that have prior experience with being supervised are better positioned to be good supervisors. Having this modeled to them during their own supervision helps them to be empathetic and able to relate to their supervisees. Ideally supervisors come equipped with a good balance of technical knowledge, subject matter expertise, familiarity with the local context, and the soft skills such as empathy and good active listening skills to create a comfortable and safe environment. The best supervisors demonstrate care and investment with their supervisees and actively check in on their well-being. They are humble, down to earth, good listeners, non-judgmental, and flexible.

Supervisors should be well-trained and equipped with both theoretical and practical knowledge, and participants placed particularly high value on the supervisors' practical experience.

Ideally supervisors continue to evolve their expertise through additional training and professional development and continuously learn through feedback and exchange with their own supervisors. It is also noted that recieving feedback from supervisees is a good way to continue to grow as a supervisor.

Supervisors must take care of their own mental health and are only able to effectively help others if they are themselves emotionally well, a theme that came up frequently in workshops.

Participants expressed that while supervisors are not expected to solve all of their supervisees' problems, but their key task is to support supervisees' well-being and mental health. This can have a psychoeducational function for supervisees, guiding them in their ability to recognize when they may require additional emotional support from a professional.

Supervisors usually come with their own personal bias and can feel like experts, but in MHPSS there is no universal formula for solving problems. Everything depends on context, and supervisors need to understand their own limitations.

A supervisor should allow a supervisee to 'stumble' - shouldn't be too rigid as this type of approach hinders growth

The greatest obstacle to good supervision is the supervisor being too authoritarian

Open for feedback

Using clinical experience as a tool for the understanding of the supervisee's challenges and strengths

The supervisor should try to complete the agreed tasks from the last session

The important tool is having clear standards And avoid harm to beneficiaries

Best Practices and Qualities of Supervisees

Building trust is a two-way process, though the supervisor is responsible for laying the foundations. Supervisees need to demonstrate openness and a willingness to learn, and availability, mutual respect, and a constructive aim are expected from both parties.

Supervisees above all need to be motivated, willing to be vulnerable, able to take constructive criticism and advice, and respectful of the supervisor's time in order to ensure a successful relationship.

Ideally supervisors and supervisees agree on the terms and boundaries of the relationship in the beginning. This may occur through a formal supervision agreement or contract. The first steps of the communication between supervisors and supervisees can prime the relationship in a lasting way. If supervisees are expected to prepare a lot ahead of a session they may feel like they are being evaluated rather than supported.

Supervisees can help foster successful sessions by coming prepared with questions and informing their supervisor ahead of time what cases they will want to discuss. Independent reflection about the supervisee's cases is helpful from both supervisor and supervisee. Supervisees often reach out to supervisors in order to get an unbiased perspective on their cases and to voice their concerns, and this is most effective when both parties have had time to reflect before the session.

The Anatomy of a Supervision Session

Each supervision session ideally has an agenda, which is expected to be set by the supervisor but informed by the supervisee. This gives the supervisee a base to start their discussion and helps the supervisor understand the background and get prepared for the session. However, this pre-session preparation should not be framed as a formal requirement, but as a practice that the supervisee willingly agrees in participate in for the sake of their own professional and personal development.

Many supervisors prepare for sessions by familiarizing themselves about the case and context, prior conversations, and relevant technical knowledge. Some include tools such as checklists ahead of time. The importance of the supervisor being mentally prepared for supervision was also highlighted.

Some supervisors and supervisees report feeling anxious before supervision sessions and describe a desire to perform well or concern, in the case of acting as an external supervisor, about not being able to give sufficiently specific or relevant feedback.

> **Follow-up**

> Feel a bit heavy, most cases that come to us will have lots of problems and are complicated

> Ethical dilemmas with confidential issues

> Sometimes I feel like that I need to share

During a session, active listening by the supervisor is key, and those who reported anxiety before a session report an increase in confidence and engagement during the conversation when this is present.

After a session, supervisors ideally summarize any conclusions or recommendations, share access or links to relevant tools, and later follow up with their supervisees to check in on progress. Supervisors, are generally expected to be accountable for keeping records of all supervisory interactions through tools such as adherence checklists and supervision notes.

Some supervisors report a feeling of heaviness after sessions from absorbing a lot of difficult or emotional information, and some report ethical dilemmas with confidential issues they may feel obligated to flag, emphasizing the importance of their being able to access their own supervision.

> To prepare for a session, the supervisor should go through all documents e.g. adherence forms as well as client case notes etc. This takes approx 1 hour. Especially important for group supervision

> being mentally prepared and available for the exchange

> Check previous work and items left as action plans for the supervisees

> A brief model or manual for therapy allows detailed tracking of supervisee's progress

Challenges to a Successful Supervision Relationship

Geographical accessibility and logistical barriers, particularly in conflict zones where supervisees may be distributed far into the field, can seriously hamper a supervisor's ability to offer support.

Timely supervision is important and key moments can be missed by too-infrequent sessions.

Group sessions require a lot of time that is often not available.

Trust can be breached when a supervisor uses a case, even anonymously, in an article or published research without consent. Similarly, when supervisors bring up a supervisee's personal issues in a group setting as an example, even if not mentioning them directly, trust can be quickly eroded.

Challenges arise when supervisors also have managerial functions over the supervisee. This impacts the ability of supervisees to feel comfortable to be open and honest about challenges and mistakes.

There is often no set mechanism or avenue for feedback. A lack of an anonymous or mediated feedback channel leaves direct feedback from supervisee to supervisor as the only option, which can be sensitive for both sides and lead to discomfort or conflict.

> All the issues of the context (conflicts, staff turn over, out break), sudden and unexpected things that shifts the attention to implementation. Supervision becomes secondary. Instability of the context.

> When you are their boss and you are supervising, then its an obstacle and they wont open up

Power Dynamics

In a field setting under constrained circumstances supervisors are more likely to be responsible for both management and technical supervision, and a high-pressure emergency situation may result in a focus on the practical managerial aspects of the relationship over the supportive and professional development aspects.

When supervisors are also managers or administrators, this often creates anxiety around performance evaluation in supervision sessions. The ideal collaborative and non-hierarchical relationship between supervisors and supervisees is hampered by a supervisor with a dual role, and supervisees may feel that they are being judged or evaluated. Some supervisees are afraid of appearing weak or incompetent if they are struggling or unable to fulfill their duties completely.

It's difficult to discuss sensitive points with my managers, I don't want problems with them.

The greatest obstacle is the role of the supervisor, whether they are also a manager. Both are important but if supervisors have a dual role it can hamper the sessions because there are other expectations that factor in.

From the perspective of supervisors who are also managers or administrators, supervisees may look to them as all-knowing and expect them to sign off on every decision. It may be necessary to disengage after giving them a task or assignment so as to not make supervisees feel monitored, until it is time for a regularly scheduled session.

At the root of the issue of dual-role supportive and administrative supervisors is a lack of resources and available staff. Some organizations address this by engaging external supervisors, who are often either remote or of a different culture, or both (see relevant sections for the implications thereof).

A supervisor should ideally have more experience than the supervisee in order to be effective at giving advice and providing examples.

Cultural Factors

Expat supervisors can bring valuable outside perspectives, though these learnings are not always applicable in the local context.

Their assignments are often too short (~6 months) for them to really immerse themselves into the local context, and they also sometimes unable to do so by working out of the coordination office rather than in the field.

A lack of cultural awareness by expat supervisors can hamper a supervision relationship due to their missteps about cultural taboos and not approaching certain topics delicately enough, such as religion, sexuality, gifts, tribal or sectarian conflicts, and gender norms.

Risk of not apprehending the cultural aspects that might influence the way the supervisee is doing his/her work

Culture factors into both the relationship between supervisor and supervises, and also is relevant to attitudes about mental health, stigma etc.

Expat managers often stay in the coordination office more than in the field.

Most of our management supervisors are expats from other countries, and only for max. 6 month contracts. So it's difficult for them to adjust and be effective.

Cultural sensitivity to the gender roles and power (in)balance

Many expat managers don't have the cultural knowledge about Iraq

We have a very patriarchal culture in the Americas; a lot of volunteers are men but in MHPSS we are more women. It's difficult for the men to talk about their emotions or to cry.

Male volunteers feel comfortable sharing with us but don't feel comfortable sharing with their male peers.

In some contexts gender factors strongly into a successful relationship, and many supervisees are more comfortable with a supervisor of the same gender. Some participants noted that in more traditional or conservative cultures, male supervisees can be generally reluctant to share personal difficulties, especially when they are volunteers and not themselves trained MHPSS workers.

Support for Supervisors

Supervisors themselves are exposed to significant emotional stress and benefit from themselves receiving supervision. Participants expressed the high level of strain their work can put on them, and its impact on their well being and potential burnout. The supervisors of supervisors can also take a mediating role in the case of any conflict, complaint, or disagreement involving a supervisor and their supervisee, which can also contribute to their need for support.

A number of supervisors express a desire for additional training, both in formal settings focused on specific psychosocial knowledge such as about LGBTQ support or suicide prevention, as well as in informal or unstructured settings such as in an apprenticeship model.

Some supervisors rely on their global advisors for personal and professional growth and to get advice.

The COVID pandemic and the sudden switch to remote sessions has added significant stress for supervisors, and some report struggling to maintain their own self-care.

It would be good to have a checklist to evaluate burnout

specific training on role of supervisor. (educator, support psychological, monitor what they are doing and helping to improve)

ongoing check-ins for supervisors would be useful e.g. peer supervisors and also master supervisors

to work along side other supervisors to exchange experiences.

Supervisor to have a supervision as well, to work on his/her personal feelings

informal, unstructured training based on apprenticeship model was useful

More training for supervisors is always useful

Supervision for the supervisor

On-going support is required for supervisors to prevent burn out.

Remote Supervision

Remote supervision is most effective when the conditions around it are as close as possible to in-person sessions, such as both parties being alone in their own space, both sides being on video and maintaining eye contact, and maintaining regular scheduling. Agreeing on a set of tools, protocols, and expectations is key to a successful remote supervision relationship just as it is face to face. When a supervision relationship is initiated in person and continues remotely it is more likely to be successful and open than a purely remote relationship.

Exercises such as role-playing, brainstorming, and the discussion of cases were found to be effective tools both in remote and face-to-face sessions.

These exercises are sometimes difficult due to a lack of physical presence and challenges in being able to pick up on nonverbal cues remotely.

The downsides of remote supervision are difficulties focusing on the conversation, exacerbated by technical difficulties and connection issues, as well as a lack of technical know-how. The supervisor also lacks the ability to get an understanding of the supervisee's day to day context and situation in the field and has to rely on what is being said verbally only, since nonverbal cues are much more difficult to read.

The biggest barrier to successful remote supervision is a lack of access to reliable technology and internet connection in the field. In some cases, supervisors and supervisees rely on text and chat groups to communicate when phone or video calls are not feasible.

The advantages of remote supervision are that there is often more time to discuss each case, and that long and difficult travel can be eliminated in favor of more sessions. Some individuals can be more comfortable to speak about personal issues remotely, and it's easier to have larger group sessions due to simpler logistics of getting everyone together. Still, for the most effective overall supervision experience, remote sessions should be complemented with occasional in-person meetings whenever possible.

Remote sup is more time efficient

Important to manage communication channels

Often overtime

Limits use of soft skills (body language)

More difficult to illustrate things/demonstrate bodily exercise

Difficult to manage common boundaries

Always accessible

Must rely on what you are being told, trust

Can reach larger groups for training

Requires technical skills

Difficult to understand the context if not living there

Reshapes how we work

Peer Supervision

Peer supervision is most helpful for the technical aspects of MHPSS work and for sharing experiences and advice. It may also be an effective measure in the field where formal or licensed supervision is often unavailable or impractical. Different ideas of what constitute as peer supervision came up in discussions, ranging between formally established peer groups, and conversations that took place among peers in transit or during breaks or meals.

The main advantage of peer supervision is the shared experience of participants and the implicit familiarity with the context, culture, and cases.

debriefing sessions but they are general with people which are not therapists and they dont know how to handle pressures

We don't have a structured supervision process, the realities of the field don't really allow for it

The support of my peers helped me do my work; my supervisor was checking in on me informally via messages

We mainly use individual supervision if there is a single person who is strongly affected or burned out. otherwise we rely on our peers

The downsides of peer supervision include that peers may lack the experience sought from supervisors and that they are not impartial, making it difficult to address very personal issues or workplace challenges.

External Supervision

External or third-party supervision is helpful because of the level of objectivity than can come from someone outside of the organisation and who is not management. It facilitates the ability to discuss difficult team dynamics and interpersonal problems that might arise in the workplace. However, many organizations cannot afford external supervisors and therefore rely on dual-roles where supervisors also double as managers. In external supervision relationships, challenges include a greater difficulty understanding the context, cases, and constraints that supervisees face.

Challenges can also arise in capturing institutional learnings, which then require additional effort by supervisors and supervisees to capture feedback and communicate learnings and progress back to the organization.

Not being able to afford an external contractor supervisor is a challenge

External supervisors can be more objective than a manager. Managers can support you differently. Supervision activities should be budgeted for.

the built-in supervision is helping greatly in an ongoing conflict area, compared to outside supervisors

Group Supervision

Supervision in groups happens frequently in MHPSS. Groups are considered to be efficient because supervisors can meet with more than one supervisee at a time. Through group supervision, supervisees are able to share their experiences and support one another. This can happen within teams, or in a multi-disciplinary approach.

Confidentiality is a concern with group supervision, as there is no guarantee that supervisees will maintain confidentiality of what was shared in session. Group supervision also relies on the supervisor being able to facilitate dynamics and discussions in a meaningful way.

Only team supervision is done together. But group supervision is otherwise better to do with groups where they are from different organizations.

Orientation meeting with the group present my supervision style and they have a choice to choose the supervisor

Group sessions are more efficient; we don't usually have time to work with them individually.

Supervisees' implication within group is based on trust and supervisor's capacities to provide a safe & secured space, BECAUSE supervision brings participants to expose themselves and share confidential infos about services users

The Need for Common Standards in Supervision

Depending on the country, different levels of formality may be required. Examples provided in workshops were, in the US, supervision can only be carried out by a licensed professional, whereas in Uganda or Jordan, sometimes supervision may be carried out informally by someone considered a competent and empathetic professional.

In general, in the field particularly in humanitarian emergencies or crises, there are rarely specialist supervisors on site, and the demands and urgency of the situation may not allow for regularly scheduled sessions. In that case, supervision is often done informally or as peer support

While regular and formal supervision remains important this informal approach is often the only realistic possibility in the field, especially during a disaster or crisis. A more formal supervision session is often only possible well after a high-pressure field assignment.

While some MHPSS workers accept this informal standard as practical and pragmatic, others expressed a desire for more Inter-Agency Standing Committees (IASCs) and/or WHO global frameworks for supervision in humanitarian and emergency settings in order to uphold minimum standards of care even in difficult settings and contexts. Some participants point to ANSE, the Association of National organizations for Supervision in Europe, for these standards, but these may be limited to the European context.

Organizational Support for Supervision

Not all organizations offer supervision for MHPSS workers, either due to a lack of funding, a lack of motivation or understanding of the supervision process, or the infeasibility of offering formal supervision in the field and in crisis settings.

Some MHPSS workers expressed frustration with their attempts to advocate for supervision within their organizations.

The most commonly cited barriers to the implementation of effective supportive supervision are rooted in resource constraints and a lack of the necessary knowledge and motivation on the part of organisations to implement best practice. Addressing these issues comprehensively will require a cultural shift in the field, to achieve a situation where the wellbeing of all MHPSS personnel is prioritised in the course of the vital work they carry out.

secure a time for the professional to attend (making sure workers are able to attend the session)

Thank you
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धन्यवाद
Kiitos
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Hvala vam
شكرا
Asante
Na gode
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Hvala ti
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