

Supporting the emotional wellbeing of adults in child care settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

Shona Quin and Pen Noel

Abstract

In order to provide an emotionally responsive environment for young people in care, we must turn our attention to the emotional wellbeing of the adults who look after them. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to highlight the importance of the emotional wellbeing of caring adults. This includes introducing processes within the workplace that can be adopted to support the development of self-care, such as developing skills in self-awareness, emotional literacy and regulation, enabling adults to be emotionally present and responsive to the needs of young people. This article reflects on the introduction of supervision, reflective practice and consultation within Aberlour Sycamore Services in Scotland, summarising a recent evaluation of these structures.

Keywords

COVID-19, self-care, self-awareness, emotional literacy, supervision, consultation, reflective practice

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Introduction

Coronavirus has challenged the way in which we all work. Our role as therapists is likely to have changed considerably as we explore different ways to communicate with children and adults who are faced with pre-existing psychological challenges or trauma, alongside the very real threat of a pandemic. We are dealing with an unprecedented situation that will be affecting us all in very different ways. Not only does the virus create huge anxieties within the population as a whole but the impact of the restrictive measures imposed to cope with our current situation will be catastrophic for some.

In a recent position paper in *Lancet Psychiatry* (Hughes et al 2020), it is highlighted that increased social isolation and loneliness as a result of lockdown procedures, is strongly associated with anxiety, self-harm and depression (Elovainio, et al 2017). In addition 'the socio economic effect of the policies used to manage the pandemic ... will inevitably have serious effects on mental health ... [as a result of] ... increasing unemployment, financial insecurity, and poverty' (Barr et al 2012). This has been the lived clinical experience of the second author whose service experienced an increase in unscheduled care much of which was assessed to be in response to COVID-19 related situational stress such as significant change in routines, reduced emotional support from friends, family circumstances and perceived educational pressures.

The psychological impact of the last few months will be apparent long after lockdown and the need to respond to the emotional wellbeing of the country will be paramount. As clinicians working to support those who care for our most vulnerable young people, we truly believe that in order to meet the emotional

needs of our young people, we have to equip our adults with the ability to understand their own emotional needs. Only then can adults effectively model self-awareness, emotional literacy, and regulation, in order to offer the co-regulation required by the young people in their care.

We all carry experiences that have shaped us into the adults we are today; some of these have been positive and some of these experiences have been negative. Our own personal experiences of adversity often remain buried deep within our subconscious following years of believing that to 'open cans of worms' would be detrimental to our wellbeing, or that, as adults, we must 'just get on with it'. Rather than enabling us to get on with our lives, these hidden experiences often hinder our capacity to offer helpful responses when others experience distress and as such, can negatively impact upon our ability to be effective responsive carers and educators. Without looking more deeply into this and our conditioning, we cannot break free from what amounts to be unskilful, inherited behavioural responses.

Adults are excellent at repressing their own personal experiences and the emotional responses to these experiences, often resulting in poor mental and physical health (Patel and Patel, 2019). In the first author's (SQ) experience, at times of increased stress these repressed emotions can leak out and impact upon an adult's ability to respond in a safe and emotionally contained way.

Unfortunately, we are all too aware that there is considerable stigma associated with emotional ill-health and this has a huge impact upon adults seeking support, despite there being many effective treatments available (Corrigan, Druss and Perlick, 2014). In addition to this, emotional literacy and emotional health is inconsistently taught within schools adding further to a skills gap in our

understanding of emotions as a normal human experience and our ability to talk about and share our feelings.

The threat of COVID-19 has reached us all. Since lockdown, much of our time has been spent supporting adults with understandably high levels of anxiety on the frontline within care settings. A recent paper in *PracticeUpdate* (Cooch, 2020), recognises the impact COVID-19 is having upon frontline health care workers' mental health due to unexpected stressors such as anxiety associated with risk of infection, a sense of helplessness and a lack of social support due to social isolation. The author's experience of supporting keyworkers, such as care staff and teachers who have continued to work throughout the pandemic, has highlighted that they too share similar anxieties.

For some adults in child-care, anxieties are associated with pre-existing unresolved anxieties that have been triggered by the onset of the pandemic. This experience brings into sharp focus the importance of offering time and space to adults to support them to express and contain their anxiety within child-care settings, to enable adults to be emotionally available to contain the anxieties of the children in their care.

The majority of us will experience strong emotional responses to the current situation we are in and, as these are common human experiences at this time, we believe we have an opportunity to dispel the myth that intense emotional experiences and feeling vulnerable only happens to others. If we can talk about our emotional experiences and speak openly, we have an opportunity to support each other and reduce the stigma associated with emotional vulnerability. We can prioritise our own emotional wellbeing to enable us then to be available to meet the emotional needs of others.

Within residential child care there is an increasing recognition that the emotional wellbeing of the adults working within the sector is paramount in order to provide environments in which young people can heal from traumatic experiences. Acknowledging that adults require opportunities to develop their self-awareness, practice emotional literacy skills and learn to respond to their own need for emotional containment and regulation, creates a workforce that can then model these skills and abilities and offer the emotional co-regulation that all young people require.

Aberlour Sycamore Services is a residential provider offering care for children and young people in Fife and the Highlands of Scotland. In 2018, the organisation went through a major re-structuring process. As part of this process, the first author was asked to become involved in discussions about how they might continue to meet the emotional needs of the young people in their care. Aberlour Sycamore Services are committed to developing an emotionally responsive system and have been willing to commit to the emotional wellbeing of their adults as a means to facilitate this. Alongside an accessible and compassionate senior leadership team, both authors offer reflective supervision to managers alongside monthly consultation and group reflective practice with teams across Fife and the Highlands. In addition, the first author has been involved in offering responsive de-briefs following significant incidents and is available to offer two individual supportive sessions and signposting for adults who may require this.

Reflective supervision offers managers the time individually to reflect on their own practice, building their self-awareness and creating a safe space to share successes and challenges. Team reflective practice and consultation is offered

monthly to each team as a group and provides an opportunity to initially reflect on atmosphere, and individual experiences within the team, followed by a more focused discussion on young people and practice.

Given the recent restrictions imposed, all supportive structures have been delivered remotely enabling these structures to remain in place at a time when people feel at their most vulnerable. This has allowed ongoing monitoring of the emotional wellbeing, and atmosphere, within teams as the adults work longer hours to limit the risk of contamination.

It is vitally important that adults recognise their role in providing the emotional support and containment their young people need. All too often, our young people in care are expected to engage with an unknown adult in a clinic setting, further reinforcing that they are different and that their emotional needs are in some way abnormal. Enabling caring adults to develop their own emotional awareness, literacy and regulation allows them to model these skills within the safety of the home environment, encouraging development of these skills in a natural setting.

It was important to evaluate whether the interventions currently available to the teams was enabling adults to provide an environment that promotes emotional wellbeing and what additional supportive structures would be helpful. As such a questionnaire was developed by the primary author to allow teams to comment anonymously on the support they have received. Below is snapshot of comments and ideas for future development.

In response to the question: 'Do you believe your emotional needs are acknowledged and understood at work', managers responded:

We are allowed to be human and have ... feelings without being judged.

Senior management are always at the other end of the phone.

Conversations (with senior management) are open and thoughtful and ensure balance is met between head and heart.

Having different outlets to explore my personal needs...supports me to make sense of my emotions.

Care staff were asked whether the support offered enabled adults to respond more compassionately to the children in their care.

[The support network] enables me to meet the needs of the young people I work with and gives them the best of me as I am not holding my feelings and allows me to be present for them.

...through the support I receive from my manager I can be that support for the adults so that they can be there for the children.

When asked specifically to comment on reflective supervision, managers commented:

I feel this gives me a space to explore situations in the house, my feelings, my responses, my practice and enables me to join the dots and explore different perspectives which allows for me to stay balanced in my approach.

Reflective supervision not only helps me respond to the children's needs but also the adult's needs which allows them to support the children.

I find the support to be beneficial. I guess it has supported me to really acknowledge my own needs, which has supported me to be self-aware in the approaches I use when supporting others.

Managers and team members commented on consultation:

I think a very important message that has come from all of these consultations is the idea of being emotionally contained ourselves before we can help emotionally contain a child in our care.

I feel monthly consultations work really well. It allows us to stay focused on what needs to be achieved, creates opportunity for everyone to reflect together with the young person at the centre of decisions and is a shared space which allows everyone to express their views whilst also working collaboratively to meet the needs of the young person.

It is also a good space to recognise what the child is going through, separating the behaviour from the child.

I observe the team to be more energised after these consultations to do the best they can for our children.

I find them refreshing, especially if it has been challenging in the house, you can really open up your thinking and challenge practice.

...these sessions not only help strengthen the tools we have to work with our children directly but also delve into and support how we feel as carers.

...we had a consultation and we were supported in using the same response and this worked so well.

I feel this gives a fresh perspective and is beneficial in helping support adults that further supports the young people.

...and on group reflective practice

...this enables me to be more self-aware and creates a space for me to think more deeply about the decisions I made and the reason why I have made them as well as thinking if I would do anything differently next time.

.I feel this is beneficial for the team to open up and reflect, away from supervision.

.I believe this has created space in the team for open, honest conversations.

...the team reflective practice is very beneficial... I feel going through what happened and getting time to discuss if there was way to prevent these unsettled occasions... is helpful.

I think constant reflection is so important in our role and sometimes getting it wrong and learning from it makes better informed decisions in the future.

Additional supports care staff said were available within the service:

regular check-ins with senior managers

action-learning sets in managers meetings

development days

external counselling service

managerial supervision

end of the day wind down informal de-briefing / chats

my managers door is always open

support from colleagues and shift partners

team meetings

What additional support would be beneficial?

I think all adults within the organisation would benefit from clinical supervision.

I think it is more beneficial when...reflective practice... is held without managers depending on what has gone on. It gives adults their own space to speak about how they are feeling.

To develop... consultations... further I think we maybe could have more frequent sessions and dialogue, particularly if a young person is struggling or more timely feedback to strategies that may not be successful.

...smaller reflective meeting may be useful too, related to incidents.

Based upon the comments received, it appears that care staff value the opportunity to reflect on themselves and their practice alongside the accessibility of an emotionally responsive senior management team. Additionally, the emotional availability of colleagues and the ability to regularly reflect on practice at the end of a shift creates an opportunity for staff to share their thoughts and feelings, giving them permission to be vulnerable, for them to acknowledge successes and areas for improvement without feeling judged or criticised. This in turn builds trusted relationships between adults who will then be more available to respond compassionately towards each other during times of stress.

Compassionate adults become compassionate carers.

The methods adopted at Aberlour Sycamore Services have been well received and provide suggestions about how services can provide forums for adults to express themselves freely without judgement, acknowledging their emotional vulnerabilities and recognising the impact these can have upon their own wellbeing and their availability to others. By looking after each other, we will be

both, physically and emotionally healthy, present adults, and will be better equipped to meet the emotional needs of the young people in our care.

We hope we can take the opportunity before us to develop environments that encourage adults to talk about their feelings and acknowledge the emotional vulnerabilities that have been revealed or exacerbated as a result of coronavirus. May it offer opportunities within childcare settings, and ideally beyond this sector, to help adults to share, reflect and support each other to move through this current challenge, encouraging increased self-awareness in adults to be a part of the new normal.

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About the authors

Shona Quin is a clinical psychologist working independently across residential care environments in Scotland. Between 2001 and 2015 she worked within child and adolescent mental health services in England and Scotland while developing her interest and practice in residential child care. She now works independently with six care organisations across Scotland, offering training, consultation and supervision. Shona is particularly interested in how we support and empower care teams to recognise their role in providing therapeutically informed, responsive care environments, building their understanding of the challenges our young people face while also equipping them with strategies to be emotionally present and respond to the needs of the young people in their care.

Pen Noel works with Shona at Psychology Space, offering reflective supervision and consultation to managers and staff teams in Aberlour Sycamore Services in the Scottish Highlands. She is a clinical psychologist with over 10 years' experience working within child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) with a particular interest in neurodevelopmental and intensive therapy services. Pen is interested in supporting carers to develop understanding of the broad range of neurodevelopmental presentations and to develop self-awareness and self-care in order to meet the complex needs of some of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people.