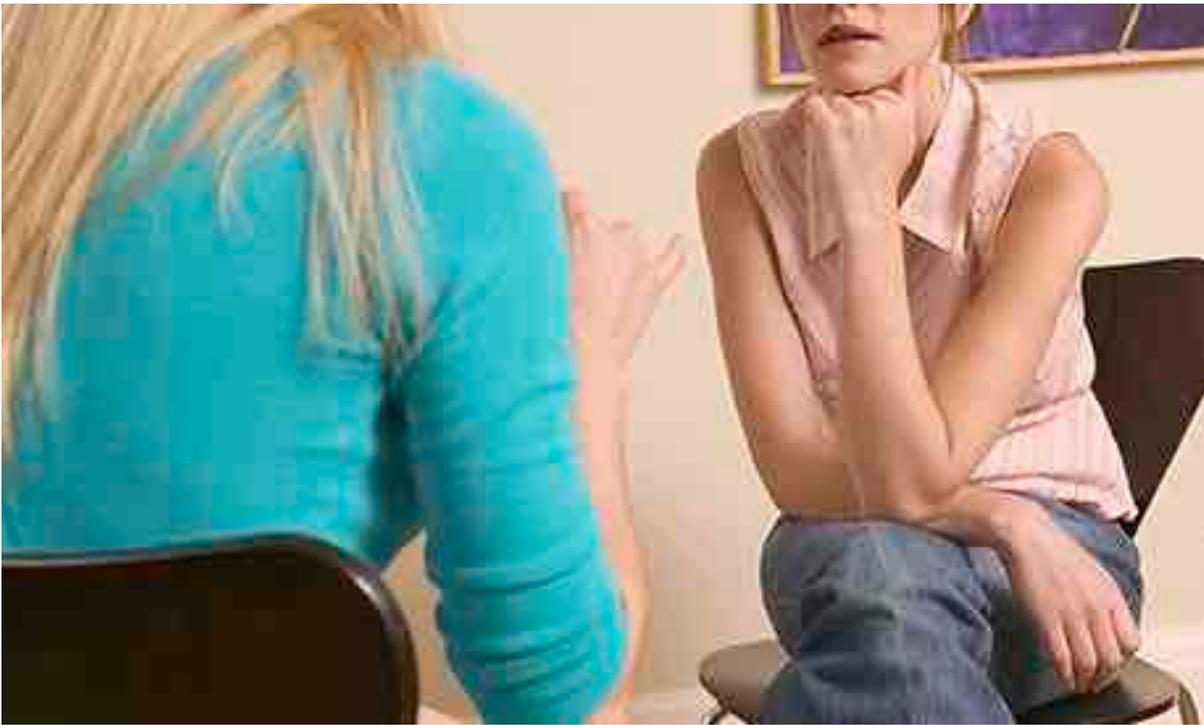


theguardian

Social work supervision: process or procedure?

English social workers would benefit from Swedish-style personal reflection as part of their professional supervision



One year ago I packed my bags with seven years' social work experience and left my job in Sweden for fresh challenges in a new country.

I moved to England to participate in a national programme called [Head, Heart, Hands](#), which aims to demonstrate the impact that combining education and care can make to foster carers and the children they support.

I soon realised that many of my skills would have to be put on the shelf for a while, but after almost a year I can now look back and reflect on what I have learned. One of the main differences I observed between social work in England and Sweden is how we reflect through supervision.

I believe that self-awareness is crucial for social workers because we use ourselves as tools to help people to reach their goals. Our values, identity and experiences influence every decision that we take, so by developing our self-awareness we can become the best that we can be in our profession.

One way to reflect is through regular professional supervision. I have found supervision in England to be very focused on procedure: I meet my line manager on a monthly basis and take that opportunity to share information about my caseload. Though this is helpful, the focus is on procedures – what has happened; what my next steps should be.

Process-oriented supervision, by contrast, focuses on feelings that arise through our work and how this relates to our values. It gives us awareness about ourselves that we can use in future relationships in work. The reflective supervision I have seen in practice in England is professional and carried out with much commitment, but appears to be limited by lack of time.

I think back to experience of having process-oriented supervision as a social worker in Sweden. The supervision was led by an external qualified supervisor who was trained in systemic psychotherapy and took place in small groups with close team colleagues. We met twice a month outside our ordinary working place.

The role of the supervisor was to challenge us to look at our work from a different perspective, to keep reflecting on our values and how they influence what we do.

Because the supervisor was external, not our line manager, the experience gave us an independent view on our work. Sharing this with colleagues meant that we learned from each other, regardless of how long we had been in the profession.

Swedish academic research suggests that managers believe process-oriented supervision helps to reduce stress among social workers and enhances professional development. Employees who have regular process-oriented supervision say that it supports them to try out new ideas and gives them energy and strength to cope at work.

Our work as social workers is complex and demanding. Sometimes we take decisions that will change people's lives forever. Often we leave our job wondering if we made the right decision.

We need to reflect on our feelings, and we need to learn about ourselves. It is our responsibility to ensure that policy makers are aware of the importance of process-oriented supervision across the profession.

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