

The case of the sleeping supervisor

Jim Holloway considers what we might learn from the apocryphal tale of the colleague who dozes off when in the supervisor's chair

Over the years I've been in practice I've heard several therapists say they once had a supervisor who fell asleep in a session. You might have heard this a few times yourself and perhaps wonder, like me, if it's really true. I've never experienced it myself, in almost 25 years as a supervisee with many different supervisors, but I suppose it might yet happen. (From the other side, in the supervisor's chair, I would like to point out that I've never nodded off when supervising – as far as I know. Seriously, I'm pretty sure I would remember if one of my supervisees ever had to wake me up in the course of a session.)

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Whether told with gentle good humour, fierce indignation or a combination of both, the story of the sleeping supervisor is worth probing. It's a subtly potent little tale that seems to have a life of its own in our professional circles, rather like a piece of folklore. This sort of micro-myth must exist for a purpose, surely, so it could be useful to take a closer look at it and explore what kinds of meaning it might carry. One very direct approach, as a purely personal experiment, is to take a few minutes to imagine seeing your current supervisor fall asleep during one of your sessions, and then observe as vividly as you can what you think and feel as the scene unfolds in your imagination. This exercise might seem a bit weird, but I did it myself and found the effect

surprisingly moving and productive. If you try it for yourself, I think you'll find the thoughts and feelings that arise may yield some unexpected information about the current state of your relationship with your supervisor.

As you create the scene in your mind, you might be aware of tender and concerned feelings towards him or her. Is she unwell, or distressed, or just extremely tired for some reason? If you feel the urge to help, what can you say or do? Alternatively, you might get primitive sensations of being lost and abandoned, and start to feel anxious, scared or angry. Notice where your thoughts take you. Maybe you begin to wonder about what kind of parallel process might be taking place. Most of us are familiar with the phenomenally sleepy way in which we sometimes react to clients, and we know this embodied effect can be unconsciously transferred into the supervisory relationship. Might that help to explain why the supervisor has apparently drifted off? Sitting silently for a minute or two while she dozes is not what you expected from the session, no doubt, but something constructive could emerge from the strangeness of the experience, if you let it develop with full awareness in your imagination.

You might take the view that almost everything that occurs in supervision is potentially relevant data to be used in the service of the client, in which case you can probably find it quite easy to stay curious and reflective. But perhaps you're simply not in the mood for a sensitive reverie and instead you get busy exercising your sharply critical mind with immediate contractual concerns about professional ethics and fitness to practise: your supervisor is seriously letting you down and is probably over-working or suffering from an undisclosed illness. That may or may not be the case, but either way it could still miss the point, which is the plain fact that you're totally pissed off with your supervisor for falling asleep in front of you. How dare she? You tell yourself this situation is absolutely not your responsibility and you're not going to rescue her or somehow make excuses for her. The session feels like a waste of valuable time and is definitely not what you're paying for.

Now, there are many angles we could take here, but let's talk about money. What

difference does the fee make? If you imagine a colleague dropping off drowsily in a peer group or co-supervision session, I guess your response would be strongly affected by the greater equality in the collegial relationship because no money changes hands. The true significance of your ethical commitment to care for colleagues is heightened in this sense, because no one is in charge and no one is paid to take control. When you pay your supervisor for their professional service (whether one to one or in a group) the equation is different. The way I see it, a proportion of the fee I'm paying my supervisor is for their self-care. At a basic level, the supervisor needs to charge enough for each session so they can make a good living without having to run so many weekly sessions that they become over-stretched and exhausted, and also so they can afford planned time off from working, whether just an occasional half-day or a whole week or two.

This is about organised resilience. One of the best measures to take against compassion fatigue as a therapist or supervisor is to get right away from the world of work fairly regularly. For me, a daily break is essential too. I'm a firm believer in the benefit of taking an afternoon nap for half an hour – a wonderfully simple luxury for which I feel grateful every day – but of course I must make sure it's affordable. It may sound odd to state that my supervisees (and therapy clients) are paying me to switch off in my own time, not theirs. But in relation to the mysterious tale of the sleeping supervisor, this reality is exactly what the supervisor must wake up to. ●

About the author



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