

Enhance the compassion in supervision by Shabnam Ahmed (Social worker / Team manager)

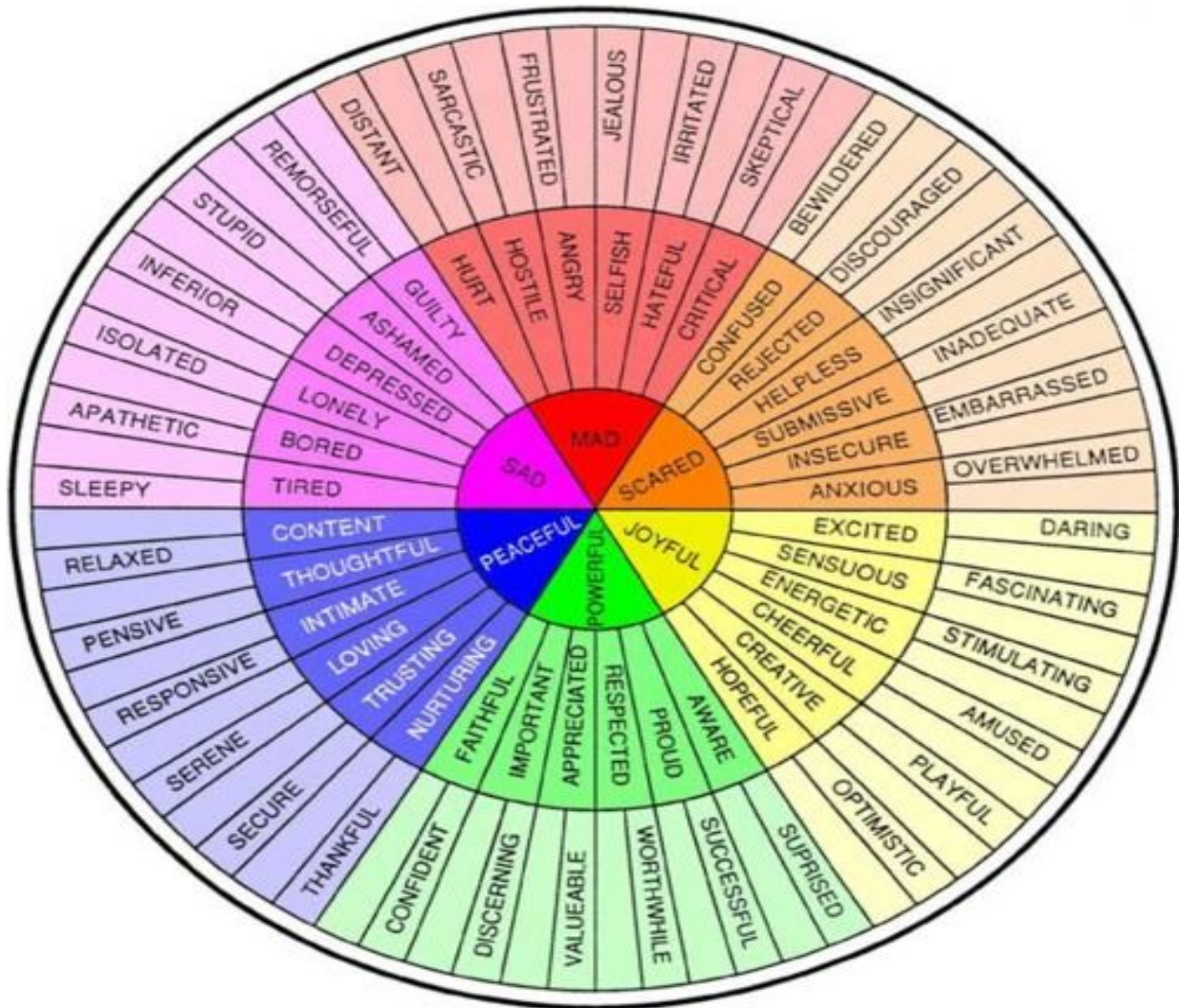
Earlier this year the prime minister of Great Britain told everyone to only go into work if they couldn't work from home. That day saw my office building resemble a haunted monument where people dared not enter. Many adjusted our personal spaces at home to accommodate confidential working, not knowing when things would ever go back to normal and when we could again inhabit and breathe life into our office spaces.

As a social worker and a team manager in Adult social care, I have noticed that currently the Covid19 situation has brought with it many challenges for all front line staff which need to be at the very least recognised. This includes things like finding a suitable and confidential space to work at home, juggling work with home schooling young children, feeling guilt not working at the pace accustomed to. Dealing with death at an unprecedented rate and that as well, alone, without a colleague sitting next to you. For some it has included a close family member being hospitalised and relying on that one phone call a day to get an update and for others losing someone close and not being able to attend the funeral or get the support they themselves need due to rules around social distancing.

I myself with 22 years' experience in social care have never encountered so many sad stories in one week alone. Just because we work with the elderly and their carers the premise of our work is not all doom and gloom and is certainly not our expectation or aspiration for those we work alongside. However, these are unprecedented extraordinary times, requiring therefore unprecedented and extraordinary action. So, as managers who supervise staff potentially experiencing the situations described above, what can we do? Do we need to consider supporting in a different way, and if so, what is that different way?

I am suggesting that one way is through compassionate supervision. Whilst compassion should be an integral feature of supervision in the human services profession anyway, I am arguing for this to be at enhanced levels during the pandemic. Firstly, very simply this might be by offering more frequent supervision to those that need it. Bearing in mind that currently all meetings are virtual, enhanced compassion can be shown through making sure supervision takes place with your video on. The visual enables us to extend our tone complimenting it with facial expressions and gestures.

Secondly it is important to create the space and time for feelings to be named, allowing emotions safely back into social work practice is something I feel very strongly about and do not see this happening enough. A number of tools are helpful in enabling this. One I have recently been using is the wheel of emotions first developed by the psychologist Robert Plutchick.



Why, I have found this tool extremely helpful is because the very British response to the question “How are you” is usually “I’m fine thanks”. This tool enables, if of course supervisees are willing to engage in this way, to move beyond this stage to acknowledging personal feelings at a deeper level and discuss the impact and support a person might need. I have found that it has helped particularly those individuals, who usually find it more difficult to verbalise feelings and open up in a different way through identifying the intensity of the feeling.

Finally enhanced compassionate supervision moves beyond just listening and recording some of the difficult stuff to taking some action if that is what is required. It involves us Doing and Changing the way we do things and leads us to challenge the status quo. An example of this at the simplest level is making an adjustment to working hours for those that are juggling home schooling with work. On another level it may be redeploying someone to increase their wellbeing and sense of purpose. Adjustments to existing policies around bereavement leave and special leave is also something this situation is highlighting for us as managers.

At the core of compassionate supervision are the basic human essential requirements of connection, acceptance and engagement. All three relational ways of existence are much needed during this pandemic. Furthermore as I wrote in a previous article in edition one of this magazine, perhaps the new ways of working we adopt during Covid19 shift us away from the rule books when we return to the new normal and make us more human and intentional In engaging with and thinking about how to practice enhanced compassionate supervision, I have certainly evolved and can relate to Foucault’s description of “The act of becoming”.

“I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning” (Michel Foucault)

You may also find interesting a recent podcast I was involved in on the topic of supervision

<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/adults/content-pages/podcasts/virtual-supervision-a-supervisors-perspective/>