

Shame in the Supervisory Relationship

Melissa Heinrich, M.S.

The following literature review, to be presented in poster format, explores shame within the clinical supervisory relationship. Throughout this review shame is differentiated from guilt as feelings of being inherently inferior (shame) versus knowledge of having performed below expectation (guilt). Put more simply, the belief that an individual *is* wrong, versus *having done something* wrong. Supervision encompasses a relationship that is completely unique from other relationships in that several roles are inhabited by the same person, the supervisor. A supervisor is not a supervisee's therapist, though therapeutic material is anticipated for discussion. Mentoring and gatekeeping are also part of the role of the supervisor, adding an element of power differential. Self-disclosure on account of both parties adds an element of shared vulnerability, further complicating this already complex relationship. Because of this complexity, the supervision process can be shame-inducing. If feelings of shame go unexplored, a major lapse in the learning process is inevitable, crippling personal and professional development. Conversely, the exploration of feelings of shame can be beneficial in a multi-faceted manner by informing areas of growth and enhancing self-understanding. A key factor which often dictates whether growth is supported or blocked is the nature of the supervisory relationship. Here, a sense of safety is necessary within the environment of the relationship in order for feelings of shame to be presented and processed.

This literature review is presented in three sections. The first section explores shame-inducing factors of the supervision process for both parties (supervisor and supervisee) to be aware of. Common reactions to shame are highlighted in the second section to enhance awareness on both sides of the relationship. Recognizing shame will, at best, lead to discussion

and processing of shameful feelings, augmenting the learning process. At worst, shame can impede growth, block learning and facilitate disconnection when the establishment of the safe environment is overlooked. The last section explores considerations for navigating feelings of shame within the supervisory relationship. Shame can enhance self-growth when explored in a safe environment—allowing individuals to grow personally and professionally. Doing so teaches clinicians-in-training about facing feelings of shame, and prepares them for similar experiences with clients.