

Feeling, thinking, being: A call to mindfulness in times of crisis

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Feeling and thinking in times of crisis.

If the emotional landscape of social work practice wasn't hard enough, the coronavirus (COVID-19) onset has certainly increased the probability of fear, anxiety, tears and frustration for practitioners in recent weeks. This has perhaps led to an even higher sense of 'felt responsibility' for busy practice supervisors, as they continue to navigate the world of risk and performance pressures and ultimately trying to maintain a clear line of sight on all the children and families they have oversight of. For many of you and your staff, this will be in parallel with taking care of your own families and adapting to a significant change of circumstances within your own homes.

In discussing how best to respond, we were surprised by how difficult we have found it to think about what we might write as a helpful Practice Supervisor Development Programme (PSDP) response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Is it the scale, unfamiliarity and uncertainty that is associated with it, which makes it such an unbearable task? Reflecting about writing this piece brought to mind for one of us (Gillian) the acutely observed paper written by Margaret Rustin, which sought to understand what Victoria Climbié had lived through – her internal world and state of mind – prior to her death at the hands of her aunt and her boyfriend. It is a deeply powerful and moving read, which remains highly relevant although it was written over 15 years ago, and serves as a very helpful way into thinking about our current situation.

In her paper, Margaret Rustin outlines how professional behaviours can mirror the dysfunctional dynamics of some families and how child protection and adult mental health work can negatively impact on professional wellbeing. In the final section entitled Training for Mindfulness, a term which when the paper was written was not as widely recognised as it today, she writes:

'Mindlessness is a defensive solution which unfortunately fits all too well with complex bureaucratic systems. In an individual person, the failure to keep things in mind, to make connections and to have a perspective that connects past and present is readily seen to lead to a fragmented sense of self and to disrupted relationships. Some of the individual workers who gave evidence sadly seem in their practice to have been functioning in this way. The absence of thoughtfulness is just as much in evidence at the level of systems. The combined impact of Victoria's and Kouao's states of mind, which I have tried to delineate, is very painful to absorb. Unless workers have a theory and practice which allows them to perceive such levels of distress and have a context in which they can assess its impact on them, instead of being pulled into identifications and counter-identifications, the casework required cannot be done.'

Adopting or sustaining such an approach feels particularly important, given all the new practice challenges being encountered. However, to develop such a position and to empathise with children, parents, social workers and supervisors in this way, requires us to ask ourselves a range of challenging questions.

Multiple perspectives

If you are a child living in a household which is volatile, with little, or no, guarantee of consistent physical or psychological care, how has the pandemic impacted on your daily life? Is this the only experience you are currently exposed to now? If so, we know how significant it is for children living in vulnerable situations to have just one person ‘on their side’, be it a teacher, an extended family member, a friend’s parent. What is it like when a significant figure is no longer accessible?

Similarly, if you are a parent who struggles on a daily basis to provide the essential level of care for your children due to previous trauma or mental health issues, what must it be like now to have sole responsibility all the time for them? How have worries about the pandemic made coping even more difficult? How have the changes to essential services further impacted your ability to meet the needs of your family? For some parents their response to social work involvement under ‘normal’ conditions can be hostile. It is important to understand that such behaviour may be a way of keeping someone involved and might represent a paradoxical and seemingly contrary search for attachment. When such a relationship is less accessible, such as is the case now, the sense of abandonment such parents could be experiencing, may be very acute, eliciting more challenging behaviour in order to forge a connection.

This then leads to thinking about the social workers tasked with working with children and parents who are currently facing such difficult and uncharted professional terrain. How can they be supported to keep thinking about their practice experiences and reflecting on the emotional responses they evoke? As we think about the social work task in this new, unanticipated context, how do these extraordinary circumstances cause us to reevaluate what social work involvement might represent to parents and communities facing these challenges? How might the universal threat of COVID-19 realign or reinforce power dynamics between families and social workers? How might the courage and commitment of social workers to protect vulnerable children and support parents, despite the potential risks to themselves, be recognised by families?

And what then do practice supervisors have to offer, that can meet these unprecedented human experiences and adapted professional working practices? Those individuals who are relatively new to the practice supervisor role may feel that this situation adds another layer of complexity, to what is already a challenging transition, from practitioner to supervisor. However, for all of us in the sector, if there was ever a time to put our skills, experience and knowledge as social workers and supervisors into practice, it is now. For participants who attended the Practice Supervisor Development Programme (PSDP), it provides an opportunity to enact and develop some of the knowledge and skills you have taken from the programme.

Being more than doing

This call to mindfulness seems very prescient for our current uncertain times, when it is clear that we cannot continue as is, but are not entirely sure what should we be doing? All too often uncertainty, and its concomitant, anxiety, lead to knee jerk reactions, for example, the search for the newest practice model, approach or idea in the hope that it will provide a quick fix or be the elixir to some of our most fundamental challenges. When the COVID-19 crisis was looming, for many people, including ourselves, we noted an urgent need to ‘do’ something –

to volunteer, to return to frontline practice, to provide rapid practice guidance. For new practice supervisors finding themselves in new professional terrain, there was a similar 'doing' imperative to develop new practices and procedures, in order to fulfil the professional requirements of the individual's specific roles and the organisation's primary task – promoting and safeguarding the wellbeing of children.

Under normal circumstances, child welfare work is an emotionally charged professional activity and adding the anxieties associated with COVID-19 is exacerbating what is an already volatile space. As reactive and instinctive 'doing' responses to uncertainty have become more apparent, we have realised that in crisis situations, when the world becomes unfamiliar it is important to pay more attention to what you are already familiar with – to the quotidian, the everyday – and avoid being provoked into reactive new ways of behaving.

This requires us to recognise the significance of first and foremost attending to our feelings, or our 'being,' about the intensity of the unprecedented circumstances being encountered by everyone. In so doing, it is possible to more accurately think about what sort of actions, or 'doings', might be most helpful. 'Being' before 'doing' enables practitioners and practice supervisors to more fully feel and more thoughtfully understand the experiences of children and parents, and from this position of holistic awareness more astute and accurate interventions can emerge.

So, in spite of encounters being conducted in unfamiliar digital dimensions, it is possible, through carefully observing, listening and noticing one's reactions to practice exchanges, to become empathically attuned to what is going on. It's easy too, to be spurred by a crisis into adopting a heroic posture, when 'being' and 'being ordinary' is what is required. Coming to this realisation also echoed for us, a golden thread that runs through the PSDP, namely the crucial importance of reflective spaces and mindsets for empathic engagement with children and families. And in the COVID-19 crisis the value of these professional approaches holds true more than ever. Rather than the crisis provoking reactions, it needs to evoke reflections.

[Applying PSDP resources and tools](#)

In putting our own reflections together into this blog, we took the opportunity to consider several of the **[most popular models and concepts](#)** from the PSDP and the **[open access resources and tools website for practice supervisors](#)** and how these may be useful in their application to the current circumstances of the pandemic. We hope you find this a useful refresher of knowledge and a reminder of the agency that you do have, to continue to support resilient social work practice.