Collegial support for counsellors

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The present paper identifies what Australian counsellors across State borders believe to be the benefits of collegial support: not the least being the growth and development of a professional identity. It also identifies counsellors' perceptions of what behaviours they expect of themselves and of their colleagues in adhering to principles of ethical practice as befit an authentic professional identity. The context embraces all facets of collegial support and while investigation was initially focused on collegial interaction within Member Associations and Association Chapters, individual respondents chose to broaden the identified scope by making reference to additional aspects of collegiality and a variety of different collegial scenarios. Additions to initially intended collegiate scope include professional and peer supervision; agency, multi-disciplinary, and private practice workplaces; city, regional, and remote locations; and pitfalls and problems as well as values and benefits.

Nellis and Roberts (2009/2014) remind us that "collegiality", as a term, has its roots deep in religious and academic history. However, it could be said that the notion of collegiality is as old as human existence: for, have not human beings always moved in twos and tribes?

In linguistic terms, collegiality dates back to political protocol adopted during the era of the Roman Republic (509-27 BCE) where collēgiālis was the practice of having at least two people (and always an even number) in each magisterial position of the Senate. The practice was later replicated in organisational structures adopted and adapted into protocols of the Roman Catholic Church, where a collegiate of bishops was set up by the papacy for the purpose of sharing the tasks of administration and organisation within the early Church (Oakley & Cunningham, 2018). This notion of a "collegiate" is still adhered to by Pope Frances who, in his Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America during the General Coordination Meeting of 2013, called for those who work with him to "work in a spirit of solidarity and subsidiarity to promote, encourage and improve collegiality" (2013).

With an added touch of Mid-French influence in the 14th century CE, collégialité has evolved to refer to the modern day relationship between colleagues: defined by AskDefine (n.d.) as being those explicitly united in a common purpose and respecting of each other's abilities while working towards the fulfilment of that purpose. Thus, as postulated by AskDefine, the word collegiality implies respect for the commitment of persons to the common purpose and their ability to work toward it. In like turn of phrase, the word "colleague" can connote an associate in a professional, academic, ecclesiastical, or civil office.

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Context

Coming at collegiality from a back-door perspective, Caesar (2006) suggests that while nobody may know exactly what collegiality is, everybody knows what it is not. His suggestion is that for collegiality to be, it needs to be actively promoted and free from political connotation. He also suggests that breaches need to be defined and addressed.

The value of collegiality is explored by Bennett (1998) who, with focus on ethical practice, gives significant voice to the social constructs of isolation and individualism within educational settings. Reflecting the importance of developing positive relationships with colleagues, he proposes a model of collegial support that values an environment of collegial professionalism: a model where professional ethics and professional growth are pivotal to the development of a supportive environment. The concept that professional persons perform more effectively and efficiently with collegial support is grounded in principles underpinning organisational theory as espoused by Covey (1991) and Senge (1990).

Jones (1997) wrote that for true collegiality to occur it needs to be between like-minded professionals who must "be aware of one another's strengths to capitalize on them, be willing to learn from one another, trust one another, treat one another with respect and courtesy, and behave ethically" (p. 164). For counsellors, this may be seen in the effective interactions occurring within peer review and group supervision exchanges and also in gatherings of the collective where, to be effective, there must be collegial relationships of equality, with no person holding a position of authority over the other while each adheres to the responsibilities associated with role and function. Furthermore, as noted by Fraser and Horrell (2018), these types of relationships are pivotal to providing professional support and growth between counsellors as well as providing emotional, academic, and professional support in managing the demands of professional practice.

Counsellors need opportunities to gather as colleagues and to chat with each other with a vision to (a) maximising the flow-on benefits to clients through energising/re-energising the tired brain; (b) transforming working in the field of emotional and mental health from a place where there is a focus on mental illness to a place where there is a focus on mental wellness; and (c) making their every-day work with people who are hurting more meaningful, more "normal", more relevant, more respectful, more sensitive, and more empathic. In his book, A possible dream: Retaining California teachers so all students learn, Futernick (2007) highlighted the notion that strong collegial support systems promote positive morale. He also pointed to the critical role that relationships play in practitioners' attitudes towards their work. While Futernick's research was positioned in the education arena, his findings ring true across disciplines and are deemed to be particularly relevant in any field of human service.

From an Australian perspective, The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership Limited (AITS) references the development of what they term as "Professional Learning Communities" (n.d.). It is stated that a Professional Learning Community (PLC) involves collaboration, sharing, and ongoing critical interrogation of practices in line with professional standards. It is also stated that PLCs should be learning oriented and promote the growth of teachers and students. Transferring the construct of the PLC into a counselling context, it could be said that a Collegial Support Group (CSG) involves collaboration, sharing, and ongoing critical interrogation of clinical and therapeutic practices in line with professional standards as outlined in codes of ethics and practice and scope of practice documents published by industry related professional associations.

According to Woo et al. (2004, p. 13) as cited by Moir-Bussy, Andrews, and Smith, (2016), "Survival of the counselling profession depends on counselling's quest for establishing a clear, common professional identity" and there is no better platform for achieving this quest than through commitment to the development of professional collegiality reflecting the model of the CSG. Drawing from the findings of the study undertaken by Moir-Bussy et al., it is noted that among counsellors, there is a shared understanding of the relationship between the concept of collective identity, the core philosophy of counselling, and the methodological approach of counselling: that is, how counsellors perceive and engage with clients is directly related to their sense of professional identity.

Nellis and Roberts (2009/2014) suggest that one of the most personally enjoyable aspects of one's career may be developing close relationships with colleagues; and while the context to which they refer is academia, one might well ask, "Is this not true for any profession or any field of interest or any career path that one chooses to follow?" Herein lies the very foundation of the ultimate goal of collegial support that is deemed to be professional, ethical, committed, socially enjoyable, and truly valued: and that foundation is a focused integration of experience that strengthens the professional identity of the counsellor and produces a flow-on benefit to the clients who are supported by professional engagement and therapeutic intervention.

December 10, 2018 heralds the 20th birthday of Australian Counselling Association. A significant achievement across these 20 years is the network of collegial support that has grown across region, state, country, and beyond our shores.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the growth and development of Member Associations and Association Chapters across the States, as well as international networking across borders. This paper identifies what Australian counsellors across State borders believe to be the benefits of collegial support. It also identifies counsellors' perceptions of what behaviours they expect of themselves and of their colleagues in adhering to principles of ethical practice as befit an authentic professional identity.

The context embraces all facets of collegial support and while investigation was initially focused on collegial inter-action within Member Associations and Association Chapters, individual respondents chose to broaden the identified scope by making reference to additional aspects of collegiality and a variety of different collegial scenarios. These additions included professional and peer supervision; agency, multi-disciplinary, and private practice workplace environments; city, regional, and remote locations; and pitfalls and problems as well as values and benefits.

Research Aims

It is hoped that the findings of this study may;
(a) Strengthen the collective professional identity of counsel-lors;
(b) Prompt counsellors to join their local Member Association or Association Chapter;
(c) Encourage counsellors who may be feeling the impact of isolation and individualism to explore ways of finding a colleague or three with whom to connect for the purpose of mutual support, encouragement, and enjoyment;
(d) Invite counsellors who are not living in remote places, yet are distanced from centralised Chapters, to consider co-ordi-nating a Chapter in their own constituency or region: with the help and support of their Association and experienced co-or-dinators, so as to ensure that relevant guidelines are ethically and constitutionally adhered to.

Method

Design

A combination of guided reflection with a focus group and individual invitation to respond to a single open-ended prompt was presented to potential respondents. The guided reflection posed eight questions for discussion:[1] one question presented to each of eight sub groups. The prompt simply asked respondents to consider what they believed to be the benefits of collegial support from the perspective of their own individual experience.

Respondents

In total, 68 respondents from Queensland, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory (ACT), and Victoria chose to share their thoughts. All were professional counsellors, eight were educators, and 15 were professional supervisors. Identify-ing characteristics were representative of the broad community. There were recent graduates and clinicians who have been practising for well in excess of a quarter of a century. There were male and female counsellors and there was a mix of cul-tural background, religious faith, and sexual orientation. Seven respondents participated in both activities.
2000/2015).

Procedure

The focus group was a Group Supervision Session, facilitated by a certified and registered Professional Supervisor. The theme of the session was underpinned by Article 2, clause (a), item ix of the Code of ethics and practice of the association for counsellors in Australia (Australian Counselling Association, 2000/2015).[2] As questions were discussed, a collaborative portrait was composed by working through a process of reflective practice. At the conclusion of discussion, a spokes-person for each group presented the group's response to the whole group. Group responses to the collegiality focused questions together with individual responses to the prompt, profiled a broad landscape featuring the findings of the collective.

Findings

Benefits of collegial support as considered by respondents are diverse and numerous and are thematised across three key headings – Benefits, Making It Happen, and Pitfalls and Problems. Sub-themes within the broad framework of "Benefits" include Personal perspective, Professional perspective, Making connections and finding supports, Fun and enjoyment, Private practice perspective, Collegial support in the workplace, Perspective of the rural clinician, Response to loneliness and isolation, and The role of Professional Supervision as a model of collegial support. Sub-themes in relation to "Making It Happen" include Responding to need, Creating a supportive environment, and Expectations of Self and Other. The theme of Pitfalls and Problems is addressed as a single entity.

Benefits

Personal perspective

From a personal perspective, collegial support is said to give the unique opportunity to listen, learn, and share skills, knowledge, and experiences with peers in an informal yet supportive environment. It is seen as providing a powerful model for caring for one another within a professional context and is noted as being an important adjunct to formal professional supervision while also being a conduit to feeling supported and connected. It means having the ability to network with like-minded colleagues while also having a safe space within which to debrief one's thoughts while safely reflecting on practice.

There are the benefits implicit in sharing information and making new friends and there are also opportunities for sharing life experience and being listened to with respect and empathy. Counsellors express that they have found going to Chapter gatherings has been "such a gift" in their lives and they state that "it is so good to be able to mix with people who get you: people who have an intrinsic understanding of what you do and why you do it". There is also appreciation and a knowing that if one is having a tough time, "there is someone to encourage you on when you may feel like quitting".

Professional perspective

From a professional point of view, value and benefit encompass what is referred to as "the easy and economical access" to shared and experiential Ongoing Professional Development activities and professional input. As counsellors learn from the experiences of others in relation to particular topics and techniques, they feel supported in their own work.

Having opportunity to share one's own my experiences in relation to particular topics and techniques also helps counsellors to feel validated in the way they work and to realise that as a collegiate, "we are all striving to convey understanding with clients". There are times when being able to get a second opinion on a challenging situation can be a big help as there are times when another can see a pain free way of handling a difficult situation when one has become so deeply involved in the situation to the point of being stuck.

Through engagement in these shared opportunities, counsellors state that they feel humbled by their learnings. It is also expressed that collegial support helps to process things, whereby ensuring a balanced service. As stated:

We are in an era where as technology changes, so too, do patterns of communication; thus creating a forum to explore the pros and cons to ensure that what we do in therapeutic intervention is grounded in principles of ethical practice. It is noted by respondents that in the present environment, the professional identity of counsellors has very mixed reviews and can be denigrated by others. This is a point that was also identified in the study of Moir-Bussy et al. (2016) and it is again acknowledged that to have the support of other counselling colleagues can validate one's sense of purpose and professional identity. It is further stated that the issues of professional identity and professional accountability walk hand-in-hand and that knowing one is part of a network of supportive colleagues can be a motivator not to let the others down. As shared by one respondent, "Knowing that if I stumble I may bring others down with me can give me resolve to continue to do a professional job".

Then there is "inspiration": not to be confused with "professional development". Described as making a far broader and deeper connection, it is noted that while one can get professional development from an anonymous webinar, Inspiration is said to better describe "the sense of awe at what colleagues are doing and experimenting with, while discovering which can inspire me to want to stretch and grow".

Making connections and finding supports

What is highly valued is the sense of camaraderie: "knowing that someone else understands what I'm experiencing". There is also the encouragement and support given by colleagues and the sharing of knowledge, so freely given, and found to be so helpful when struggling with difficult cases.

As noted by the respondent who started attending Chapter gatherings while studying on-line, "It's never too early to connect". What was found to be missing when studying alone was sharing thoughts and having discussions with people who were studying something similar. Coming to Chapter gatherings and hearing some of the same terms being used in discussion as were being taught in course work, and observing that what was being discussed at Chapter was grounded in theory being explored in study units, was said to be "wonderful": reinforcing that what was actually happening in practice was what was being taught in course work. As stated, "It was interesting to pick up new tidbits to check out".

What was also observed was that things do not always go according to "textbook formulas" and that counsellors need to be "switched on" to what is happening for their client while also being flexible in having the knowledge and ability to "mix and match modalities" so as to best support every client in the way that is right and best for that client: "so many needs; so many clients; and there is not one hat that fits all".

As counsellors move further along their career pathways, their hope to embrace making connections and finding supports continues. Sharing knowledge and developing structures and programs to help transfer what is learned into best practice, while building a professional service of which they can be proud, are highly valued aspect of collegiality.

Fun and enjoyment

As expressed by one respondent, "It's more fun with collegial support. Who wants to fly solo?" It is also highlighted that by definition of function, the counselling profession generally deals with the less than fun aspects of clients' lives and collegial support sometimes just makes one laugh and smile.
Wanting to "fit in" and having opportunity to connect with colleagues is truly valued. The enjoyment associated with connection is found not only in learning but also in having one's own thoughts confirmed as one engages in ongoing professional development and group supervision activities as presented and facilitated at Chapter gatherings.

Private practice perspective

From the viewpoint of the "therapist" in private practice,[3] there is the support of the friendly, accepting, and welcoming atmosphere of fellow counsellors. While the professional dream is to build a practice from which one can make a reasonable living and hopefully have some influence on the world by reducing violence, abuse, and disrespect, there is also the prophetic vision of encouraging hope and the growth of a more positive, successful place for all to live. For such a dream to be fulfilled and for the vision to take pedestrian formation, collegial support is not an option: it is a necessity. Also deemed to be a necessity is practising with others who share a common professional identity and are proud to call themselves "professional counsellors".

Benefit of collegial gatherings for the counsellor in private practice is said to flow from having the time to meet and talk with the new and the known, while getting to know what they are up to and making ongoing professional friendships. Having input from a platform that profiles a wide range of approaches and styles and finding out different contexts across which counsellors are working to support a client base managing similar issues is also highly valued: for example, the chid presenting with behavioural or learning difficulties; the child ascertained with having an intellectual disability; persons whose perception processes are ranked on the autism spectrum; those who are living with incidence of family violence; children who have witnessed and experienced abuse; caregivers; persons with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); persons with suicide ideation; persons with drug and alcohol dependency; adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse; persons presenting with diagnosis of clinical depression; persons who are displaced.

What is said to be "great", is having opportunity to get some fresh perspectives of practice while learning new skills and collecting new ideas. Further value is encapsulated in exposure to the diverse variety of perspectives and modalities used by experienced counsellors and this aspect of collegial shared experience is described as being "fascinating" while also opening up possibilities for further study, connection, and referral bases.

Working in a private practice is also noted as being sometimes very lonely; and it is stated that mixing with other counsellors in a collegial setting and sharing stories is not only helpful, but is also heart-warming.

For those working alone, opportunity to meet with colleagues at events such as Chapter gatherings is something to look forward to and something that is very much valued. As stated:

It is lovely and it feels so good to be part of something bigger. It is wonderful to know that supportive caring people are there if you ever needed them. I imagine I would feel a little lost without the connection I get at the monthly ACA meetings.

From the viewpoint of the "person" in private practice,[4] there is the reassurance of having one's own insecurities normalised:

It's OK to be human and my insecurities become acceptable around the challenges of being in private practice and the challenges of counselling in general. Mixed with the challenges of my colleagues, they become more normal and I become less insecure.

As I reflect on counselling as being a humanistic and imprecise science inspired by compassion and the desire to be of genuine service to our fellow humans, I also become consciously aware that I must first own my identify as human before I can identify as counsellor and as one counsellor in a collegiate of counsellors.

Collegial support in the workplace

Reference is made to the many life roles and "hats" that one carries into the workplace. In concert with Hermans' Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (Hermans, 2001, 2012, 2016; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2016; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2012),[5] there is recognition of the many "I" positions that each "Self" has: each being governed by time and circumstance. As stated:

When I come to work, I bring with me all that has been happening at home and on the news and with my family and friends and it is so good to be able to share and offload before the start of a new day.

Similar sentiments are expressed in relation to the closing of the day: "When I leave work, I like to become the mother, grandmother, or wife. So if I need to, I stay back and debrief before getting in the car so that what happens at work stays at work". For one respondent, the best experience of collegial support is said to be collaborating with colleagues who voluntarily meet on a weekly basis to share classroom management strategies with a view to achieving best practice. It was noted that the teachers were from all disciplines so the different ways of thinking and implementing various strategies to engage adolescent students became almost a fun time as, together, there was collaborative reflection on both successes and not so good outcomes. It was also stated that support from colleagues was found to be transformative in ways that led to change in practice, bringing one to a place of being consciously aware of methods, strategies, and techniques used; so as to make sure students were "engaged" rather than merely being present in a controlled space. It was further stated that by inviting staff from all disciplines to participate in collegial discussion, focused reflection made the students, and not the departments, the centre of attention.

In addition, the appreciation of each other's disciplines increased the positive collegiality in the staff room in a way not experienced before; "and the stress of trying to survive separately in one's own cocoon became a thing of the past".

Perspective of the rural clinician

For the counsellor working in a rural area, support of colleagues is deemed to be "very important". While working in a rural region is quite isolating, having a few significant colleagues one can call on in times when a quick debrief or just an occasional check-in is needed, is noted as being "great".
While support in work is said to be "very helpful", supervision is found to be "essential" – particularly in small and remote communities where anonymity is a rare commodity. What respondents find most helpful with professional supervision is the dual focus on the clinical aspects of case work and the holistic elements that embrace the well-being of the clinician. It is observed that having regular supervision with a "good" and "experienced" professional supervisor minimises risk of client emotional safety being compromised by dual relationships that could lead to conflicts of interest, and/or development of issues related to transferences and counter-transferences, or issues that could pose potential risk associated with developing feelings and/or actions framed by dependency and co-dependency.

What applies for the regional and/or rural counsellor is even more significant for the "remote" counsellor who defines Self as being the "I am it" of mental and emotional support for the community. It is stated that even while remote locations may have access to "fly-in: fly-out" services, practitioners are from different domains of health care and the continuity of practitioner presence "on the ground" is simply not there in a way that promotes collegial connection: for, as stated, "collegial relationship takes trust; and trust takes time to build".

Response to loneliness and isolation

While those in remote areas intimately know loneliness and live with isolation, a point very clearly stated is that one does not need to be situated in a remote location to feel lonely and isolated. What is noted is that the profession of counselling can be a very lonely one in any place. Explanation given is that counsellors rarely work in collaborative teams where they can draw encouragement and motivation from those around; and it is stated that even in a workplace that has a multi-disciplined approach to holistic client well-being, one may well be the only counsellor in the midst of many other allied health practitioners. In such a practice, the reflection is that "collegial support can just be a word of encouragement from a fellow worker in the bigger game of helping".

For the counsellor who is the only counsellor in the work environment, Chapter gatherings (where accessible) are said to provide a space for feeling less isolated and more able to connect with people who are also in the same type of situation. Chatting with colleagues in the collegial setting is also said to give opportunity to discuss what career paths and further education colleagues are pursuing; and then taking time to reflect so as to see if they are, or could be, beneficial options to explore in relation to future career moves and/or further study.

The role of professional supervision as a mode of collegial support

Respondents speak of often being faced with difficult situations and the constancy of hearing stories of difficulty day after day. This is where the collegial support that comes with professional supervision provides the permission to off-load the day or the week that was, or to discuss potential scenarios for future learning.

What is also spoken of is the struggle that accompanies the thought of colleagues who don't attend supervision and say they are OK. It is stated that excuses given for not participating in supervision include the belief that by not having professional supervision, they are saving the organisation funds. It is also stated that it is these same counsellors who display a sense of being "all over it" because they have worked so long in the industry, have so much experience, and therefore, do not need professional supervision.

This is deemed to be not OK and is believed to ultimately reflect badly on the individual counsellor, other professional counsellors, the agency, and the industry. Above all else, what is stated as being worrying to respondents is the potential impact on clients when there is no perceived need for collaboration and learning on the part of the counsellor who "knows it all".

As stated above (Perspective of the rural clinician), a significant aspect of "good" professional supervision is collegial connection. The role of the professional supervisor in being the collegial connection between supervisee and industry cannot be underestimated when it is not only the "tyranny of distance" that impacts the supervisee's professional well-being, but also the whims and turns of nature that bring flood, fire, loss of all communication with the outside world, and destruction of access roads, landing strips, and seaway docks. For professional supervisors who support clinicians in remote locations, collegiality reverts to the root notion of walking in twos and the responsibilities associated with duty of care are compounded. These supervisors are "It", and they need to be consciously aware of the significance of responsibility in providing holistic supervision where there is a multi-dimensional focus on personal and professional support that leads to best practice in the delivery of therapeutic support and intervention with flow-on benefit to the counsellor's clients.

Making it Happen

As counsellors in the focus group reflected on the notion of "collegial support" and what that really looks like in practice, a wide range of thoughts, expectations, and needs were tabled. The need to "step up and step out" of comfort zones was deemed to be a key component of collegiality – particularly in support of those just beginning their career and taking their first footsteps into the world of professional counselling. Collegial support is said to be all about authenticity and encompasses the sharing of ideas, listening, and responding with interest and respect.

Responding to need

In order to know the needs of colleagues the expressed sentiment is simply to ask: so succinctly stated in the words, "How can I expect others to know that I am interested in what is happening for them, if I don't ask?" The corollary is also posed – "If we're all listening and asking, who's doing the talking and the telling?"

So enters the element of trust in both asking and acknowledging. For trust to be there, all need to work together to create an atmosphere where there is a sense of emotional safety: a place where nothing is too "silly" or too "awful" to talk

about: a place where a listening ear and a compassionate heart can always be found. It is deemed to be the responsibility of all to observe, to identify, and to be willing to take time over and above formal and structured activities at collegial gatherings so as to chat casually over a meal or a coffee after the formalities have concluded.

Providing a supportive environment

By way of providing a supportive environment within which professional development may be enhanced, the suggestion is that given the difficulties encountered by colleagues in the work environment, there needs to be a concerted effort to "normalise" the industry – to appreciate that what clients bring to the counselling room is their "normal" and to acknowledge the need to recognise and own our own humanness in response. The need is to accept with a conscious awareness that it is OK to feel and to hurt in an empathic connection with the hurting of another human being and it is said that, as an aspect of professional identity, counsellors need to own the fact that we are not "super-human" without empathy and emotion. What is emphasised is the need for positive encouragement, networking, and connection; and in acknowledging the duality of the human and the professional states of our being, the expressed thought is that, "We all need to come along to collegial gatherings with an attitude and intention of being 100% involved and active".

So, what does a supportive environment look like? Defined in words that reflect the essence of simplicity, a supportive environment is first and above all else, a "safe space". Within that safe space, people talk and are listened to and shared information is not exploited. It is stated that when colleagues feel supported, they can allow their vulnerability to come through. People say to each other, "How can I help you?" and they feel respected. There is non-violent communication[6] and there is laughter as people "simply check-in with each other".

Expectations of Self and Other

By way of expectations, counsellors in the focus group suggested that first and foremost, peers could respond to the needs of each other by simply saying, "Hello" and by respecting the confidentiality of anything that is shared in a professional, collegial space. There is an expectation of being listened to and it was stated that if one expects to be listened to by Other, there also needs to be an expectation of Self to speak with honesty and to allow oneself to be vulnerable within a place that projects an ethos of being be safe, respectful, and non-judgemental. There is expectation that colleagues listen respectfully with no side chatting or sniggering or putting-down or texting while someone is presenting. There is also expectation that colleagues will listen with compassion, will attend, and will be curious in a place where there is emotional support and unconditional positive regard. There is further expectation that colleagues will "listen with intentionality" – a concept that reflects Heidegger's notion of "presence" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 47): Being "present-at-hand" or Being "present-in-the-world" (p.245): "concernfully absorbed" with Other (p.247).

Echoing the words of Dr Philip Armstrong (2015), "You cannot expect more from others than they are prepared to do for themselves", respondents reflected on what each can contribute to providing a supportive environment for the professional development of peers and colleagues.

There is intent to help create an environment where one can observe and talk to those around. There is intent to listen with respect, be curious, and make the time to chat over lunch so as to really get to know colleagues.

A most significant aspect of collegiality is posed in the comment, "Respect others and expect respect". It is about being open to giving and receiving and being both trusting and trustworthy. It is about recognising the vulnerabilities of others and allowing Self to be vulnerable and to reach out to colleagues. In keeping with the transactional construct inspired by Berne (1966), the feeling is expressed in terms of, "I'm OK. You're OK. We're OK."

Pitfalls and Problems

While the benefits of collegial support are significant, not all collegial encounters lead to joyful experiences, collaboration, sharing of ideas and experiences, knowledge enhancement, and professional friendships. It is suggested that while there are those who are very generous and authentic in their support and sharing, the trouble is finding those with whom one can establish a professional bond, as some colleagues can be very self-focused and tend to be "a bit precious" about their ideas and thoughts on a subject, or their supposed exclusive territory, or body of work. Others, it is said, can be "a bit snobby". As mentioned above (The role of professional supervision as a mode of collegial support), there are also those who believe that they are "all over it"; and having no need either to give or to receive collegial support, any attempt to develop a collegiate can be easily sabotaged.

It is also found that, at times, it can be difficult to sustain an on-going commitment to participate in formalised collegial gatherings (for example: Chapter gatherings), due to other commitments, distance, or having gatherings hijacked by a participant attendee. Elaborating on the concept of "hijacking", reference is made to attendees who do not participate and disrupt presentations and there are also those people who try to "outdo each other". The expressed sentiment is that:

It can be uncomfortable when there are some Narcissistic personalities fighting for attention – what they do is the best and nobody else matters. It also worries me when there is unethical use of confidential information that is shared or when that information is used subversively by someone to wave their own flag.

What I want and what I value in collegial gatherings is a platform for communicating with like-minded people and a place to gather where there is fun and respect and where I can get new ideas and learn what techniques other people are using in a relaxed atmosphere with just the right amount of structure to keep it flowing. Unfortunately, to get all this, we also have to put up with the pitfalls and the breakdowns, as well.

It is suggested that guidelines for the ethical and professional, and the effective and efficient operation of Association Chapters and Member Associations is "absolutely necessary". It is also suggested that there needs to be balance and the expression is:

If operational structures become too rigid and too business like (like having to register to attend), there is risk of losing the warmth and friendliness that define the very essence of why we come together as colleagues; and to this end, we must never lose site of the fact that we are a collegiate and not a business.

It is stated that "an organisation is only as strong as those within; and if those within are supporting one another, then they,

as a collegiate, are very strong indeed!" While acknowledging that there can be difficulties, the final claim is that "all things considered, and at the end of the day, any benefits from the collective far out-weigh the cost of not having the support of some individuals".

Conclusion

This study was initiated in response to the shared vision of counsellor colleagues relating to the relevance and importance of professional collegiality. What was found was that professional collegiality is highly valued and that the place of professional collegiality is significant in supporting the growth of a professional identity from both an individual position and a broader industry perspective.

Collegial support is found in the workplace, in casual collegiate gatherings, in professional supervision, and in more structured gatherings that are convened in collaboration with the parent body of professional associations. It is found in the city, in the suburbs, in regional areas, and in remote locations.

Involvement in collegial activities provides needs gratification on personal and professional levels. Counsellors participating in collegial activities experience a sense of connection. There is fun, enjoyment, and learning. There is an expressed sense of freedom to be one's self with no pretence: "it's OK to be human and allow my vulnerabilities to be seen while knowing that I am not being judged and that I will be supported". With that freedom, there is also reflected a sense of responsibility to Self and Other to grow and develop personally and professionally and in that growth, there is expressed a sense of achievement.[7]

Perhaps the most significant point of value to permeate all responses is the opportunity for counsellors to develop a professional identity that each and every one can wear with pride while walking tall as an individual, as a collegiate, and as an industry. As professional identity is strengthened so too is the flow-on benefit to clients. Subsequent contribution to the broader community is the profiling of a landscape of therapeutic intervention where the focus is mental wellness and where clinical practice that focuses on mental illness is destines to become a concept associated with generations past.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Questions for reflection: Collegial and professional peer support

Questions posed for discussion employing a process of reflective practice in response to Code of ethics and practice of the association for counsellors in Australia – article 2, clause (a), item ix. (2000/2015):

2. Code of Ethics

(a) The helping relationship constitutes the effective and appropriate use of helper's skills that are for the benefit and safety of the client in his or her circumstances. Therefore as members (regardless of level) of the Australian Counselling Association we will:

ix. Be responsive to the needs of peers and provide a supportive environment for their professional development.

Question 1: How am I, as a member of Australian Counselling Association, responsive to the needs of my peers?

Question 2: How do I know the needs of my peers?

Question 3: What does being responsive to the needs of my peers look like?

Question 4: How do I expect my peers to respond to my needs?

Question 5: What could my peers do by way of providing a supportive environment within which my professional development may be enhanced?

Question 6: What does a supportive environment look like?

Question 7: What do I contribute towards providing a supportive environment for the professional development of my peers?

Question 8: How can I contribute to providing a supportive environment?

Footnotes

[1] Refer Appendix A, Questions for reflection: Collegial and professional peer support

[2] 2.(a) ix - 2. Code of Ethics; (a) The helping relationship constitutes the effective and appropriate use of helper's skills that are for the benefit and safety of the client in his or her circumstances. Therefore as members (regardless of level) of the Australian Counselling Association we will; ix. Be responsive to the needs of peers and provide a supportive environment for their professional development.

[3] As opposed to the "person" in private practice.

[4] As opposed to the "therapist" in private practice.

[5] Dialogical self/Dialogical Self Theory (DST): A dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the society of the mind; intrinsically bound to particular positions in time and space, positioning and repositioning, and interacting like characters in a story (Hermans, 2001, 2012, 2016; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2016; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2012).

[6] As a model of communication developed by Rosenberg (1999/2015), non-violent communication (NVC) is a simple method of empathic communication –stating (1) observations, (2) feelings, (3) needs, (4) requests. NVC aims to find a way for all parties to express what they really want without the use of guilt, humiliation, or shame. It is postulated as being an effective pro-cess for resolving conflict, connecting with others, and living in a way that is conscious, present, and attuned to the genuine, living needs of Self and Other.

[7] Psychological needs gratification based on William Glasser's model of choice and control (Glasser, 1984; 1999; Glasser & Glasser, 1989).