



# PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION FOR MASSAGE THERAPISTS

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DR MELANIE JOHNS

By *Odette Wood*

At this year's conference in Tauranga, A GP Melanie Johns presented on the topic of professional supervision and its relevance to massage therapists. We spoke to Melanie following her presentation and she has kindly shared her knowledge on the subject with us.

### 1. What is professional supervision?

Professional supervision is a regular, planned, hour long meeting with defined goals based on professional issues identified by the supervisee. Professional issues may relate to specific clinical cases, or encompass broader aspects of work including professional relationships, workplace challenges and work-life balance. It provides the space and time to focus on each issue and develop clarity about how best to move forward. Supervision is complementary to clinical training, mentoring and counselling.

### 2. Who should have professional supervision?

Professional supervision is common (and a mandatory requirement for registration) in the fields of social work, psychology and counselling. It is also now spreading to other fields. Those for which it is very beneficial include those professionals who help clients who are dealing with stress and/or trauma. These people are at a risk of burnout and professional supervision can help to decrease burnout and increase resilience.

### 3. What's the point of professional supervision?

Professional supervision is about helping us to be happy and effective health professionals because this enables us to provide the best service to our clients. We all want our work to be effective and enjoyable and we provide a better service when we are on top of our game. An effective professional runs their practice well, is physically able to do their job well, and maintains a positive mindset with the resilience to cope with whatever arises.

As health professionals, we are great at caring for clients, but we don't always care for ourselves. We should be maintaining our wellbeing in the same way that we maintain our clinical knowledge, as an outgoing professional development activity throughout our careers. Just as regular massage helps to stop our muscles seizing up, professional supervision stops our minds from seizing up.

### 4. How does professional supervision work?

Have you ever noticed how when you explain something to someone who listens well, you can often develop some clarity yourself through the process of explaining? Or, you might realise that you didn't understand it as well as you thought and through that realisation you have identified a learning need for yourself?

Because professional supervision provides a structured contemplation of the challenges of one's work, it allows a deeper awareness into the way we work. It provides a safe space for considering issues and debriefing. It allows for the examination of issues from many angles, meaning that you can define the core problems and then work through possible ways to manage them.

Supervision is very much a critical, reflective learning process. As such, it is not simply an offloading session, where you get to dump frustrations, grievances or stressors without any aim of actually dealing with them. It requires the supervisee to be an active participant by bringing issues to the session. You therefore very much get out of it what you put into it. It is up to the supervisee to come up with possible solutions to the challenges raised, while the supervisor acts as a facilitator for exploration of these issues. Supervision also enables issues arising to be cognitively parked for structured reflection later. This means that an issue that comes up during the month, can be mentally identified and then reserved for discussion at supervision, so it doesn't eat away at you or result in it being inappropriately offloaded onto someone.

A great way to get the most out of professional supervision is to have a notebook for recording things that you want to discuss in the session. This means you get them out of your head, on to paper, with the knowledge that you aren't going to forget them, and that you don't have to stew over them or risk dumping them on family or friends. They are recorded and ready for you to raise them at supervision in a confidential, structured and useful way.

### 5. What might be discussed at supervision?

So, what can be raised at supervision? Essentially, anything work-related that gets at you. Professional issues which might include issues related to a specific client e.g. a client may have shared some traumatic experience with you or offloaded their emotional distress on you, they may have a condition such as a terminal illness that triggers your emotions, they may pose a clinical challenge leading to frustration or negativity, or they may have issues that you are simply unable to solve - social issues, personal trauma, and you feel helpless.

Workplace stressors are also a common and relevant issue for supervision. Interpersonal difficulties such as ineffective bosses, bullying or controlling behaviour, frustratingly lazy co-workers. Workplace communication issues such as breakdowns in communication or issues with colleagues who come across as aggressive communicators when this is not intended. Frustrations with workplace systems and processes that don't work well, working conditions that may be overly demanding or unsafe.

Career considerations are also a topic. Questions you may ask yourself such as "where am I going?", "What are my long-term goals?", "Am I in the right career?" Supervision can help people to identify where the joy is for them in their work, and how to maximise it. Interestingly, there is research to suggest that we can do mundane things for 80% of our work time, and be happy with this so long as the other

20% enables us to pursue passion that we hold for some aspect of our work.

Finally, work-life balance is another common issue. Learning to say “no” and finding ways to manage the guilt that results, or to manage bosses or co-workers who are used to hearing “yes”.

### 6. What are the results of effective supervision?

Supervision enables the development of an internal reflective practice and helps you find answers to your questions about your professional practice. This means you can become more aware of the issues that arise in your practice, and have a more structured way of thinking about them, rather than getting tangled up. Research shows that effective supervision improves self-confidence and self-respect. It can stop you endlessly running over things in your own head, provide acknowledgment and reassurance, help you change the way you deal with certain challenges and change work behaviours which can lead to improved workplace relationships, and provide a difference perspective of issues. Overall, it leads to improved professional wellbeing.

### 7. Why should massage therapists access professional supervision?

Professional supervision is relevant to massage therapists because if you don't have safe ways to manage work stressors, your professionalism suffers. Massage therapy is helpful in managing chronic pain and palliative conditions and these clients can pose emotional challenges as well as clinical ones. After the World Trade Centre attack in 2001, a survey of 225 people who had escaped the Twin Towers were asked what had been the most helpful in overcoming their experience. Massage therapy was second overall (after acupuncture), and first amongst rescue workers. This indicates that physical, hands-on treatment for stress was preferred to talking therapy. For those with complex PTSD, massage therapy helps the traumatised person get in touch with their body, as a step towards getting in touch with their mind.

As a health professional, you are not a robot. Client interactions create emotions. How do massage therapists pick up on emotions? They might not be spoken but be reflected in how their body responds to your therapy. Some emotions that you're exposed to will be obvious, others subtle. Sometimes it is work itself that creates emotions - frustration with treatment not being as effective as hoped, workplace challenges. Negative emotions can impact on our ability to provide effective professional care and these emotions can also impact on professional wellbeing, e.g. taking emotions home is never useful, privacy and ethical boundaries limit what can be discussed with loved ones, and talking to a colleague may not be possible, appropriate or helpful.

### 8. How does one go about finding and choosing a supervisor?

Many massage therapists may already have informal supervision with colleagues. This is called peer supervision. One option is to formalise this process by making structured time, arranging a suitable place free of distractions where (and with whom) confidentiality can be assured. Be aware that best friends do not make best supervisors. Also, that the role of the supervisor means that they are not there to solve the issue for you, or get caught up in

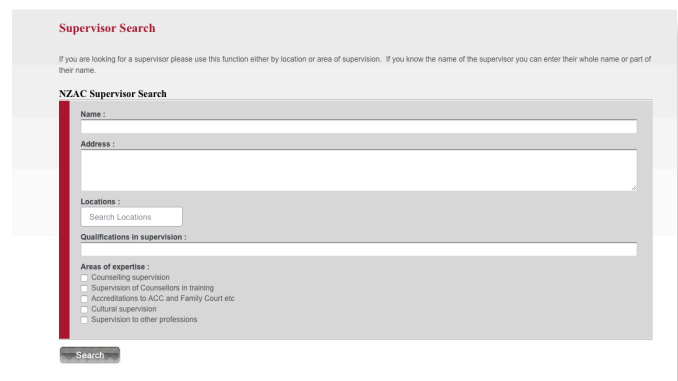
it themselves. Being impartial and objective is a vital quality of peer supervisors. Having a written agreement with a peer supervisor can help to set out the rules of engagement for peer supervision.

If you want to find an independent supervisor, consider whether you would best be served by someone with inside knowledge of your profession, or someone external. Sometimes explaining things to someone outside your profession can help crystallise thinking and offer an objective perspective.

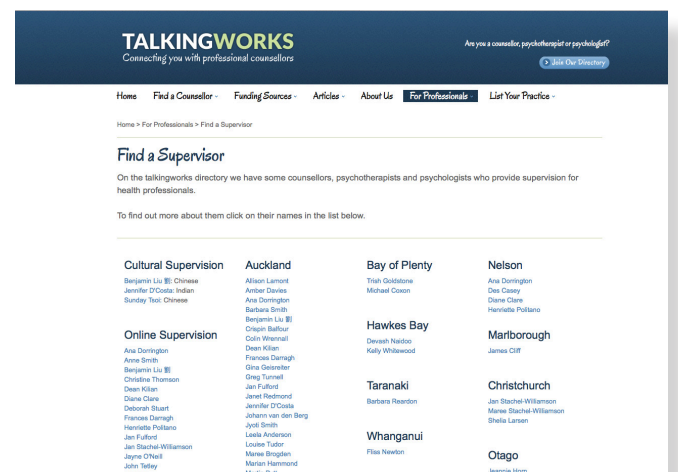
### Where to look

Just like looking for a massage therapist, choosing someone who has undergone training as a supervisor will ensure that you get someone who is appropriately trained, experienced and skilled specifically in being a professional supervisor.

There are a number of places you can look to find a professional supervisor. The New Zealand Association of Counsellors website <http://www.nzac.org.nz/> has a supervision search facility. You can find this here [http://www.nzac.org.nz/supervisor\\_search1.cfm](http://www.nzac.org.nz/supervisor_search1.cfm) Ticking the box “Supervision to other professions” will enable you can search for a supervisor in your city or region.



Talking Works is another site worth looking at. It is an online directory of counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists across the country. It also provides a directory of supervisors here <https://www.talkingworks.co.nz/pro/Find+a+Supervisor.html> where you can search for a supervisor in your area. Some supervisors provide supervision via Skype, which is a great option if you are in an area where it is difficult to find a supervisor locally.



### How much does it cost?

Fees for professional supervisors range from \$90-\$150 per hour, depending on the location. Some supervisors may work to 50 minute sessions, rather than an hour. The main centres tend to have higher rates, with Auckland being at the higher end of the spectrum, similar to massage therapy rates being higher in larger centres.

### 9. Interested in becoming a supervisor?

There are a few places around New Zealand that offer training in supervision. Many universities and technical institutes also run courses, in most cases these are postgraduate courses level 8 courses. You will need to find out about prerequisites for these courses from the academic institution themselves. Some may require a bachelor degree as the minimum prerequisite.

Some tertiary course providers include:

**University of Auckland - Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Supervision**

<https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/study/study-options/find-a-study-option/postgraduate-certificate-in-professional-supervision-pgcertprofsup.html>

**Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology - Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Supervision**

<https://www.nmit.ac.nz/study/programmes/postgraduate-certificate-in-professional-supervision/>

**Wintec - Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Supervision**

[https://www.studyinnewzealand.govt.nz/study-options/course/details?courseid=56856072&institutionid=142339&course=Postgraduate-Certificate-in-Professional-Supervision-\(Level-8\)](https://www.studyinnewzealand.govt.nz/study-options/course/details?courseid=56856072&institutionid=142339&course=Postgraduate-Certificate-in-Professional-Supervision-(Level-8))

Other providers include private training providers. It is worth checking to see if they are NZQA accredited as this gives some assurance of quality. Some private training providers include:

New Zealand Coaching and Mentoring Centre - Introduction to Supervision for Health Professionals <https://www.coachingmentoring.co.nz/supervision-skills/intro-supervision-and-supervision-skills-for-health-social-service-professionals> <https://www.coachingmentoring.co.nz/supervision-skills/supervision-skills-health-social-service-professionals>

New Zealand School of Coaching - Certificate in Professional Supervision <https://www.nzschoolofcoaching.com/prof-supervision/professional-supervision-training/>

Further information on supervision and reflective practice

MNZ has a factsheet, "Supervision, Peer supervision, Mentoring and Coaching - A Guide" written by past Regional Liaison Coordinator, Maria Monet-Facooory which you can find here in the members only area of the MNZ website <https://www.massagenewzealand.org.nz/includes/download.ashx?ID=146660>

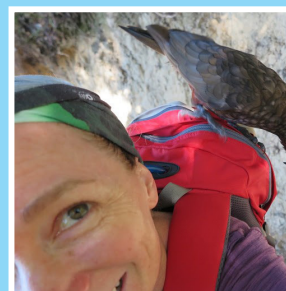
In 2016, one issue of MNZ Magazine focused on continuing professional development. Some excellent relevant articles worth going back to include:

McQuillan, D. (2016, 1st Quarter). Reflective Practice and Continuing Professional Development. MNZ Magazine, 13-14.

Smith, J. (2016, 1st Quarter). Supervision in Massage Practice. MNZ Magazine, 15-16.

### INTERVIEWEE BIO

Melanie has worked in general practice since 2004, and is a fellow of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners. She is also an accredited medical sexual assault clinician for adolescents and adults, having worked for the Bay of Plenty Sexual Assault Support Service as a forensic examiner since 2011 and as a clinic doctor since 2013. Melanie lives in Tauranga with her partner and enjoys tramping and the Bay of Plenty beaches. She has a real interest in how doctors care for themselves and completed her Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Supervision in order to be able to provide a quality supervision service, mostly to a range of doctors within hospitals and general practice.



### CO-EDITOR NOTE

Personally, I've been very fortunate to have had professional supervision throughout the 16 years I worked in the community, mental health and primary health sectors, prior to becoming a massage therapist. In all of these workplaces, supervision was part of my employment package and was paid for by my employers, and I am deeply grateful for that as it taught me the value of professional supervision as a tool for critical reflective practice, keeping myself well and reducing the risk of burnout.

I have recently taken up the habit of engaging in professional supervision again, on a monthly basis and with a trained supervisor. Being able to sit down with someone confidentially and totally independent to my work, who can guide me through a process of reflective learning, help me to find solutions to the challenges I face in my work, and help me to acknowledge what I am doing well (something we don't always do for ourselves) is an empowering and rewarding experience and I encourage other massage therapists to consider engaging in professional supervision as part of ongoing self-care and professional development. An added bonus, it counts towards CPD points.