Nurturing the Nurturer
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NMAIMH Competencies addressed

Reflection
- Seeks a high degree of agreement between self-perceptions and the way others perceive him/her
- Regularly examines own thoughts, feelings, strengths, and growth areas:

Thinking
- Assigns priorities to needs, goals and actions
- Evaluates alternatives prior to making decisions

“Service is based on the premise that all life is worthy of our support and commitment…[A nurturer often thinks] this is true of every life except his own.” (From Sarah Naomi Remen, 2000)

A number of personal characteristics have been identified as important for the effectiveness of home visitors, including; knowledge of community resources, curiosity, capacity for empathy, and flexibility. Another characteristic identified by research as being essential to participation by families, is the home visitors ability to “develop a positive helping relationship with families”. Knowledge, skills, as well as mental health also rank high in effective home visitor awareness and program quality. However, we also know that regardless of the wonderful personal qualities and professional life experience home visitors bring to their work, these qualities and experiences are not all we need to sustain the level of energy and engagement that relationship-based work in a home visiting context demands. (Harden, 2009)

According to one study more than half of the parents participating in the home visiting program “were in need of mental health, domestic violence, or substance abuse services.” Home visitors may grapple with feelings of being unprepared for, alone, and potentially inept in their role with families. How do home visitors receive the necessary training and on-going support to recognize and respond to these overwhelming, unmet needs? (Harden, 2009)

Here is where the parallel process comes into play. In order for besieged home visitors to continue to find the emotional and physical energy to hold the caregiver midst the uncertainty and stress in their lives, the home visitor must be held as well. Reflective practices and
supervision contributes toward a foundational holding environment that provides the on-going nourishment to build home visitor confidence and competence.

But more is needed to offset the potential for staff feeling chronically overwhelmed or to avoid “burn-out.” The organization itself can offer home visitors a certain amount of structure, physical resources, safety and plans around safety, and learning opportunities to build knowledge, skills. All of this contributes to the home visitors sense of overall confidence, competence increased well-being. (Harden, 2009)

Is paperwork getting done, not getting done on time or looking increasingly spotty or incomplete? Are comments about caregivers and children sounding uncaring or critical? Is the home visitor arriving late, leaving early or out sick more often? These may be not so subtle indications that staff are either not the right match for their job or that they are succumbing to the strangle hold of chronic stress.

The highly personal and caring nature of reflective practices and supervision allows the supervisor and the home visitor to recognize what forces are at play and to determine what self-care or professional supports would best fill this home visitor’s cup.

An Idea To Try…

- For newer staff, what coaching or mentoring opportunities are built in to their new job? Are coaches and mentors compensated for sharing their time and expertise?
- In what ways can your organization support and encourage staff self-care activities? Are discounts to gyms or fitness centers available? Can yoga or fitness classes be offered on-site? Does your agency encourage flexible hours and incentives for meeting productivity quotas?
- Next time you are in conversation with your home visitor, listen carefully to what is said and not said. What is the home visitor’s demeanor? What attitudes are expressed about their work and families they see?

References/Additional Resources

Harden, B.J. (2009). Beyond reflective supervision: How can my organization support staff well-being? In S. Scott Heller & L. Gilkerson (Eds.), A practical guide to reflective supervision (pp. 135-145). Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.