Sitting With Difficult Emotions
Debbie Losada MA, LMFT
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Reflection
- Contemplation
- Self Awareness
- Curiosity
Thinking
- Analyzing Information

“Sometimes the Crisis Is the Healing...” Pema Chödrön

In the mainstream Western culture, we are taught that it is easier to avoid than to confront painful emotions, such as fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness. We just pop a pill, go shopping, glue ourselves to the TV or immerse ourselves in social media, in order to find ways to avoid dealing with emotional pain. Is this helpful or is it just distracting us from better understanding ourselves? What are we modeling to others regarding how to deal with difficult emotions? What would happen if we allowed ourselves to look at painful thoughts and feelings or face challenging life circumstances head on?

Tying into last month's article, “On Change”, transitions seem to evoke strong emotions as it implies that there will be change. Often, it is new and perceived as frightening, because it is unknown. Some examples of transition in the workforce might be new staff beginning, current staff leaving or taking on different roles, a restructuring of a program or a program ending completely. It is important as well to be mindful of how transitions in our personal lives impact our overall sense of well-being.

To better understand what it means to “sit” with difficult emotions, let’s look at the following home visiting scenario:
Cathy has been working with a family for 3 months now. Each time she is scheduled to see the family, she starts to feel uneasy, her stomach begins to hurt and she experiences anxiety. As a result, she dreads each time she has a visit with this family. She tends to reschedule often or sometimes cancels at the last moment. Her tendency to miss appointments along with the accompanying feelings/bodily sensations is not typical for her compared to other families with whom she works. She is not sure why she feels this way and would prefer to not have to deal with this family at all. She is thinking about asking her supervisor if the case could be transferred to another home visitor.

She decides to broach this topic at her next reflective supervision. Her supervisor is surprised by her request and approaches it from a curious perspective. When has Cathy noticed these physical symptoms and accompanying emotions? Is it only with this family or in other situations? What thoughts is she aware of during these times? Is there something about the interactions with this family or their home environment that triggers something for Cathy?

By maintaining a curious but non-judgmental stance, Cathy is able to begin to process what activates her “shark music” due to her supervisor providing “the hands on the circle” (i.e., co-regulation). In doing so, Cathy is being “held” by her supervisor, enabling her to better “hold” the parent with whom she works, which will allow that parent to better “hold” their child (Circle of Security Parenting©). This might also be referred to as “parallel process.” By feeling this unconditional support through reflective supervision, Cathy was able to slow down enough to first of all, become aware of these strong emotions, and secondly, begin to make sense of what was causing them. Instead of dodging them, dealing with painful issues allows us to move through them faster, achieve greater insight, and increase our capacity to hold others.

Talking points for supervisors

- Try maintaining a curious stance with staff you supervise, especially during times when you feel triggered yourself. In doing so, this will aid in perspective taking and encourage self-reflection in them.
- When a supervisee’s reaction does not seem congruent with the experience they are relaying to you, this may be indicative of their own “shark music,” and further exploration may be needed.
- Be mindful of the impact of transitions and other stressful events on you and your staff and model to them that addressing these issues will benefit everyone in the end.

References/Additional Resources

Circle of Security™ http://circleofsecurity.net/

Shahmoon-Shanok, Rebecca (2009). What is Reflective Supervision? In Sherryl Scott Heller & Linda Gilkerson (Eds.), A Practical Guide To Reflective Supervision (pp. 7-23). Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.