

## The value of support for the complementary healthcare practitioner

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**A**s healthcare providers we strive to give our patients the best possible care. We dedicate countless hours to learning our discipline and honing our practice to become the best practitioners we can. Many of us are aware of the need to care for and nurture our bodies, minds and spirits to fully support us in our work. Often, however, we can overlook the benefits of peer support and professional networks, both to our professional development and to our personal growth.

### Are you getting the support you need?

In the realm of complementary healthcare, many practitioners lack access to support or supervision in their professional lives (Mitchell and Cormack, 1998). We often work in relative isolation, without the opportunity for supportive professional relationships. Burnout and compassion fatigue are not uncommon in healthcare professionals who work in emotionally demanding situations, and the nature of the therapeutic alliance that complementary healthcare providers have with patients suggests we could be at high risk.

As complementary therapists, empathy is a quality that is of great benefit to our work and helps us to build strong therapeutic relationships with our patients, however those with a greater capacity for empathy tend to be at higher risk for compassion fatigue (Benson and Magraith, 2005). And as noted by Mitchell and Cormack, 'When people work in comparative isolation with few opportunities for communication about their difficulties, [and] no support provided in their work... then vulnerability to stress and burnout increases' (Mitchell and Cormack, 1998, p.140).

In a survey of complementary practitioners referred to in an unpublished work by Mitchell in 1995, half of the respondents had no form at all of personal support at work and most desired further support than what was available to them. Two-thirds had no form of professional supervision, yet half of those expressed the desire for it (Mitchell and Cormack, 1998).

Peer support and professional networks can take many forms and this article will discuss some of these options and the opportunities that they can provide. Regardless of the type of practice you have, your experience, your location or the amount of time you may have to devote to these endeavours, there is something that will suit your needs and fit with your lifestyle and routine.

### Exploring peer support

The broad category of peer support can include peer supervision, formal peer support groups, informal peer support and mentoring. Benefits to each will be discussed and are presented as a summary in the table on page 18.

Peer supervision most commonly involves a more experienced practitioner paired up with someone who is newer to practice. The purpose is to facilitate high-quality patient care, learning and professional development and practitioner wellbeing (Health Education and Training Institute, 2012). This is a more structured approach that requires a formal arrangement. It can utilise clinical supervision, shadowing, meetings or debriefings. Peer supervision provides a formal, regular reflection and review of clinical work within a supervisory relationship. Peer review can also fall into this category, which is a form of clinical assessment often mandated by regulatory bodies.

Peer support groups, sometimes referred to as peer supervision groups, are somewhat less formal and something that can benefit practitioners at any stage of their career. Though a less formal process, there is still structure and purpose. Peer groups are self-directed: goals, expectations and ground rules should be decided by the group (Health Education and Training Institute, 2012). Regular meetings will be set up at pre-determined intervals, perhaps monthly. Meetings can be structured with a set agenda or set topic for the evening or less structured with each practitioner allotted speaking time. Some might also explore continuing education opportunities such as viewing videos related to practice or having each person provide a presentation for the group on their specialty or a professional interest. Group discussion may address a range of topics relevant to practice including ethical issues, boundary issues, clinical approaches, marketing and promotion, growth of practice or challenging cases.

Aside from support from colleagues, benefits to participating in a peer support group include the opportunity for reflective thinking, the opportunity to learn from each other, access to a range of perspectives, having a safe space to discuss issues, camaraderie and a sense of belonging. Additionally, the knowledge that support is there in between meetings can be extremely valuable.



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Informal peer support, of course, is the least structured of these options. It can be as simple as connecting with a colleague over coffee or online. Informal support can easily be fit into any practitioner's schedule. While the more structured peer support group may offer further benefits in terms of objective feedback and group dialogue, there are most certainly benefits to having a sounding board for your thoughts and ideas, particularly if the listener is someone from outside your own practice. That distance and differing experience can provide a unique and objective perspective — they may see things in another light and be able to offer new ideas, a new approach or a new way to view your situation. Quite frequently it is the act of sharing more so than the support and advice offered which prove helpful (Mitchell and Cormack, 1998). For those living in rural settings or smaller towns, a number of computer applications and social media options exist, which can eliminate the problem posed by distance.

Many healthcare professions have utilised mentorship, beginning formally with the nursing profession in the 1970s. Mentoring is not only common in healthcare, but in many other professions. The term 'mentor' has come to mean a designated person who dedicates time to aid in an individual's learning, development and progress as they establish their professional identity (Gopee, 2015). A mentor can be defined simply as a guide, counsellor, advisor or coach (Merriam-Webster, 2017).

Mentoring can take either a formal or informal approach. Formal mentoring is usually arranged by the organisation where the mentor and mentee work,

whereas informal mentoring can often naturally develop between colleagues who have an easy compatibility.

As with peer supervision, this is a process that involves one more experienced practitioner and one newer practitioner. Mentorship relies on the development of a trusting and supportive relationship that enables learning and professional development. It can entail informal communication, guidance, role modelling, career counselling, nurturing and encouragement. It is a process that can be of benefit not only when someone is establishing their career but also at times when their career may be evolving. Research has shown that through the development of professional identity, confidence and a feeling of self-worth, mentoring aids career advancement (Buck, Lewis and Bowen, 2008).

There are benefits from mentorship for the mentor as well as the mentee. The person being mentored may find that the mentoring relationship provides any number of benefits:

- Support
- Encouragement
- Guidance
- Constructive feedback
- Links to other practitioners/other areas
- Shared learning
- Confidence building
- Discussion of both good and bad clinical experiences
- A role model

	People Involved	Structure	Benefits	Challenges
<b>Peer Support Groups</b>	Practitioners of similar disciplines	Small group, set meetings, discussion, set agenda or topic	Group dialogue, support, learning opportunities	Scheduling, finding equally committed practitioners
<b>Informal Peer Support</b>	Practitioners of similar disciplines	One-to-one, varied contact	Support, sounding board	Lack of formality and structure can mean less support
<b>Peer Supervision</b>	Experienced and less experienced practitioner	One-to-one, regular contact in clinic	Regular reflection and review	Difficulty finding a supervisor who is well-suited
<b>Mentoring</b>	Experienced and less experienced practitioner	One-to-one, regular varied contact	Professional development, support	Difficulty identifying a mentor
<b>Professional Networks</b>	Practitioners of many disciplines	Large group, varied contact	Referral network, learning opportunities	Difficulty in building relationships with those in unrelated disciplines

- Development of skills (clinical, administrative, teaching, lecturing, promotional, etc.)
- Expertise and knowledge to draw on
- Ability to link theory to practice
- Structure for career development
- Assessment of competence (Gopee, 2015)

The mentor may find that discussions with the mentee can often provide new ways of approaching a situation or thinking about an old problem (Buck, Lewis, and Bowen, 2008). Professional stimulation, collaboration and motivation to remain current in one's profession are all positive outcomes of the mentor–mentee relationship (Gopee, 2015). The satisfaction that is experienced by having a positive impact on another and helping them to reach their full potential can enrich the personal and professional life of the mentor and is a fulfilling way to give back to the profession (Buck, Lewis and Bowen, 2008).

If you are not currently involved in any form of peer support, consider these options and what might best suit your needs. Seek support in your local healthcare community, within your professional association or in the larger global complementary healthcare community. There are countless online networks that allow opportunities to build relationships with practitioners around the world or closer to home.

### Building professional networks

Professional networks are another concept that can provide support and contribute to career development. The term 'network' is commonly used in healthcare to refer to collaboration or partnership, and is used to describe the relationship between organisations, groups or people (Cunningham et al, 2011). Whether we work in private practice, in a clinic with other practitioners of

the same discipline or a multidisciplinary or integrative clinic, we can strive to build professional networks that can be advantageous to our own practice and to our patients.

Benefits to being involved in professional networks include:

- Receiving referrals from other healthcare practitioners
- Having a network of other healthcare providers to refer patients to
- Consultations
- Expertise and knowledge to draw on
- A sounding board for ideas regarding clinical practice or clinical business
- Opportunity to exchange treatments
- Opportunities for inter-professional learning
- Collaboration (on case consultations, papers, presentations, research)
- Opportunity to educate regarding your own discipline
- Opportunity to promote your own discipline and your own practice
- Connections with others (doctors, specialists, other complementary practitioners) with similar professional interests
- Raising awareness of complementary health practices
- A feeling of connection
- Support from other healthcare providers

There is an added benefit to the larger healthcare community and that is simply that it strengthens it. Creating open dialogue and improving collaboration,



thereby increasing quality of care, can strengthen the healthcare community, benefitting both patients and healthcare professionals (Health Education and Training Institute, 2012). Patients will feel that they have a team of healthcare practitioners working for them rather than isolated practitioners who lack any connection and cohesion in their treatment plan. Practitioners will benefit from the support they feel from other practitioners and from the expertise that other disciplines can lend.

- It is important to look beyond our own disciplines to build comprehensive networks that include a diverse range of practitioners. The varied expertise, experience, perspectives and approaches can be invaluable in increasing our understanding of health, wellness and healthcare. While it may be more difficult to build relationships with practitioners outside of our own discipline, it is worth the effort and there are some strategies that can help in this pursuit:
- Seek out healthcare providers with similar professional interests or specialties
- Provide information on your practice, specialties, education and experience
- If you often work with patients with a particular condition, ask them to pass your info on to their doctors, specialists or other healthcare providers
- Network at healthcare events/lectures
- Join online networks related to your discipline and your professional interests
- Provide a summary of results on patients who are referred to you to the referring doctor/specialist/allied healthcare practitioner (with the patient's permission)

## Conclusion

All of the approaches outlined in this article can help to build a thriving, satisfying career and can mitigate the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue for complementary healthcare practitioners. As a sole practitioner, the individual must be proactive in seeking support (Health Education and Training Institute, 2012) and that support must come from a range of sources (Mitchell and Cormack, 1998). Professional networks, peer groups, peer supervision and mentoring are all platforms that allow for an exchange of ideas and the development of trusting, collaborative relationships that can support professional growth and a fulfilling career trajectory.

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