

# Lived experience in the workforce

Best practice supervision and  
video discussion guide

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# How to use this discussion guide

This discussion guide accompanies the:

- *Best practice supervision guidelines* ('Guidelines')<sup>1</sup>
- *Sharing lived experience* video ('video').

This guide is designed to strengthen your understanding of key supervision concepts.

This guide includes:

- a summary of the messages in the Guidelines and video
- discussion questions to deepen understanding of key concepts
- discussion questions to consider how these concepts apply to your supervisory practice or organisation
- links to more resources.

The family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing sectors are diverse. Supervision practices need to reflect the unique challenges and opportunities of each sector. This guide offers options and guidance, rather than a set of instructions to apply in all situations.

The reflective questions can be used and adapted for different contexts.

## Who this guide is for

This guide focuses on the family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing sectors. However, many of the concepts and questions are relevant to broader community service sectors.

Use this guide along with:

- 'Lived experience in the workforce', Guidelines (pages 45 to 47)
- *Sharing lived experience* video.

## Supervisors and supervisees

Supervisees and supervisors may use this guide:

- for self-directed learning
- to inform discussions in scheduled supervision
- in peer supervision.

## Organisations

Organisations may use the video and this guide in a range of situations, including:

- induction and onboarding programs
- communities of practice
- team meetings
- planning sessions
- leadership meetings.

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<sup>1</sup> The Guidelines are available on the [Victorian Government's Role of the organisation, supervisor and supervisee page](https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines/role-organisation-supervisor-and-supervisee).  
<<https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines/role-organisation-supervisor-and-supervisee>>

## Trainers

Trainers may use this guide to:

- facilitate discussions after showing the *Sharing lived experience* video.

## Key messages

- Practitioner lived experience is valuable, meaningful and a collective strength of the sector.
- The health, safety and wellbeing of practitioners and leaders in the sector is important. Workplaces have a responsibility to support their staff. Supervision is an important part of this support.
- The decision to share one's lived experience is highly personal. Some staff will choose not to share at all. Or they may share with some work colleagues but not others.
- Many staff will have their own lived experience of family or sexual violence. Supervision needs to be done in a way that is sensitive to this. Supervision should use a trauma- and violence-informed approach.
- Encouraging open discussions helps normalise sharing lived experience in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment. This can lead to greater understanding and a more united team.
- Practitioners with lived experience are so much more than their experience of family violence or sexual assault. It is important not to over-generalise or assume their responses are because of their lived experience.

## Discussion questions

These questions link to key messages in the Guidelines (see pages 45 to 47) and themes in the video.

The discussion questions may include:

- **Context:** framing for you to open the discussion with – lead with this then ask the question.
- **Prompts:** to encourage more reflection and discussion if needed.

### General questions for everyone

Question 1: How does lived experience of family violence or sexual assault strengthen practice?

#### Prompts

- More empathy for clients and their situations.
- Greater understanding of the system and its effects on clients.
- Can be a motivation for doing the work.

Question 2: What concerns (if any) do you have about the focus on workforce lived experience?

#### Prompts

- That a practitioner's own lived experience will be over generalised to clients.
- That lived experience knowledge will be favoured over other forms of professional knowledge.

### Question 3: Why might some practitioners and leaders choose not to share their lived experience?

#### Prompts

- Fear of stigma and judgement.
- They do not want to be defined by their experience.
- They do not feel the workplace will be supportive.
- They are not ready to.
- It is too personal. They want to keep boundaries between their personal experiences and their work.

### Question 4: To what extent is the sector becoming more open to embracing practitioner lived experience?

#### Prompts

- Some family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing programs are including workforce lived experience in their policies and job descriptions.
- More leaders are sharing that they have their own lived experience.

### Question 5: To what extent can (and should) supervision focus on the supervisee's resilience and strength through their lived experience to shift the view from vulnerability to empowerment?

#### Prompts

- Practitioner lived experience can act as a protective factor in coping with the work (Ben-Porat, 2015).
- Working in family violence and sexual assault sectors may help with healing, especially if practitioners get enough support.

### Question 6: Where do you think the line is between supervision and counselling or therapy?

#### Context

In the video, the supervisee becomes a bit emotional and affected. The subject matter expert explains that there is a line between supervision and counselling.

#### Prompts

- Personal experiences can inform and help the work.
- Although they overlap, supervision is different to counselling.
- Supervisors need to use counselling skills and empathy during supervision.
- The line between supervision and counselling is fluid. It depends on the situation, context and relationship.
- The discussion in the video is relevant to the work and practice with clients. This is a valuable guide about where the line is.
- Supervision gives people the chance to explore personal experiences that affect practice.
- Supervision discussions about the impact of the work can help identify when other supports might be useful. Supports could include critical incident debriefing, an employee assistance program or external therapy.
- See 'Link with other supports', Guidelines (page 15).

Question 7: How well did the supervisor handle the supervisee sharing their lived experience? Did they get the balance between supervision and counselling right?

### Context

In the video, the supervisee talks to the supervisor about their own lived experience. The supervisee opens up about the impact it has on their work.

### Prompts

- The supervisee sharing their own lived experience was directly related to the work.
- The supervisor was suitably empathic and caring.
- The supervisor explored how the supervisee coped during the home visit and was strengths-based.
- The supervisor appropriately explored emotions and feelings linked to the experience.
- The supervisor explored strategies and possible supports, in case the supervisee was affected in the future.

Question 8: What do you think of the usefulness and possible overuse of 'trigger'?

### Context

Language matters. For the video, it was decided not to use the word 'triggered'.

### Prompts

- Some people in the sector like to use the word 'triggered'. Others are concerned about its use, as it might not properly describe what occurred.
- Understanding our emotional triggers helps supervisees expect and prepare for situations that may be challenging. This can improve emotional regulation.

Triggers are like little... explosions that crash through avoidance and bring the dissociated, avoided trauma suddenly, unexpectedly, back into consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

– Carolyn Spring

Question 9: What are your thoughts on this statement?

### Context

The 'personal is professional' and all our life experiences influence us and inform our practice. Family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing practice is underpinned by feminist theory. Bringing our 'whole' self to work can be considered a feminist act.

### Prompts

- Work-life balance can be difficult due to caring roles often still falling on women.
- The work involves being genuine and the 'use of self'. It makes more sense to bring our whole selves to the work.
- It challenges patriarchal stereotypes of what it is to be a professional worker.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on consciousness, see [The Berkeley Well-Being Institute's Consciousness: Definition, examples and theory page](https://www.berkeleywellbeing.com/consciousness.html) <<https://www.berkeleywellbeing.com/consciousness.html>>

## Question 10: Are there limits to bringing our whole selves to work?

### Prompts

Some possible limits:

- consider the professional role and what this means in practice
- maintain professional boundaries and keeping some things private
- consider the impact of our personality on colleagues and clients – and adapting at times.

## Question 11: Does the idea of bringing our whole selves to work apply to broader community services?

### Prompts

- Increasingly, organisations are exploring what bringing our whole self to work means and looks like.
- Being yourself uses less energy and is more authentic, especially when working with clients.
- Community services work often involves being genuine and the 'use of self'. It makes more sense to bring our whole selves to the work.

## Questions for organisational leaders

### Question 1: How does the organisation recognise and show it values lived experience in the workforce? How does it reinforce including practitioner lived experience during supervision?

#### Prompts

- Policies are developed and reviewed with practitioners with lived experience.
- Leaders state why worker lived experience is valued in the work.
- Leaders share their own lived experience stories.
- The organisation sets up a workforce lived experience community of practice.

### Question 2: How does the organisation facilitate supervision that supports and learns from practitioners with lived experience?

#### Prompts

- Reinforces and resources regular clinical and reflective supervision.
- Considers supervisor skills and time to provide clinical or reflective supervision.
- Includes clinical and reflective supervision into business plans.
- There is a feedback mechanism so that upper management can learn about lived experience wisdom shared during supervision (systemic function).
- Includes practitioners with lived experience on key working groups.

### Question 3: How has the organisation provided guidance on purposeful disclosure when working with clients?

#### Prompts

- Best practice is for organisations to provide guidance on the use of purposeful disclosure when working with clients.
- This guidance can be developed with practitioners with lived experience and the broader workforce.



Social workers will use self-disclosure with circumspection, and only when it is reasonably believed that it will benefit the service user. If unsure, social workers will seek professional consultation or supervision to review their intention to use self-disclosure.

– Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Practice

## Questions for supervisors

**Question 1:** How comfortable are you with using reflective questions during supervision to explore feelings and the impact of the work on practitioners with lived experience?

### Prompts

- Normalising discussions about emotions during supervision can reduce stigma and make these conversations more routine and comfortable.
- Consider whether you overgeneralise or mistakenly assume the supervisee's reactions are due to their past or current lived experience.

**Question 2:** At the start of the video, the supervisor states they had wondered how the visit went. Why was this important?

### Prompts

- Supervisees need to feel that they matter.
- Trauma- and violence-informed supervision involves 'holding the supervisee in mind'.

**Question 3:** Why would you discuss a supervisee being activated or find it difficult to do so?

### Context

As shown in the video, practitioners with lived experience may be reminded of their own experiences. When this happens, sometimes practitioners become 'activated'. A supervisor may feel the need to raise the issue with the supervisee.

### Prompts

Reasons for raising the issue:

- Increase supervisee self-awareness.
- Concerns about the supervisee's wellbeing.

Reasons for finding it difficult to raise:

- Not wanting to further upset or trigger the supervisee.
- Feeling like you do not have the skills needed for the conversation.
- Personal biases and preconceptions about worker lived experience.

**Question 4:** How would you raise the possibility that a supervisee was being activated?

### Prompts

How to raise the issue:

- Describe what you have noticed in their behaviour, words, reactions and facial expressions.

- Normalise lived experience by talking in the third person or share your own lived experience.
- Be curious.

**Question 5:** In the video, the supervisor helps the supervisee explore coping strategies. How effective were they? What would you have done differently?

### Prompts

- The supervisor asks about how they coped. They explored this in detail. They reinforced using the strategies again.
- The supervisor could have asked what the supervisee needed from them going forward.

**Question 6:** To what degree is it the supervisor's role to explore coping strategies?

### Prompts

- Supervision includes supporting the supervisee's wellbeing and ability to cope in their role.
- Supervision helps supervisees to process and navigate the work's emotional challenges.
- When the discussion is about work, it is appropriate to explore coping strategies used.
- The line between supervision and counselling is fluid. It depends on the situation, context and relationship.
- Although supervision is not therapy, the supervisor does need to be therapeutic in their manner. That is, they listen, show compassion and are empathic.

**Question 7:.** Why did the supervisor ask if they could check in later?

### Context

At the end of the video, the supervisor says to the supervisee:

'Given we've got a bit more personal than we normally do during supervision, are you okay if I check in a few days' time to see how you're going?'

### Prompts

- The statement names what has occurred around sharing personal information.
- The statement shows that the supervisor knows this was not easy and that they care.
- The supervisee shared personal information and showed vulnerability and fear. The statement helps reduce the chance of shame affecting relationship.
- This is an example of 'talking about the talking', a trauma-informed practice. This can normalise reactions and reveal defences that might appear unconsciously after feeling and being vulnerable. This in turn can help prevent the tendency to avoid the supervisor (who saw the vulnerability).
- Talking about the talking helps move the person from using the more primitive parts of their brain (flight, fight, freeze and fawn). Instead, they can use the 'thinking' parts of their brain (frontal lobe), making reflection easier.

**Question 7:** How did the supervisor respond in the video? What were the strengths?

### Prompts

- The supervisor:
  - demonstrated active listening

- used open questions
- was strengths-based in their approach
- was empathic and calm.
- The supervisor asked the supervisee what support they needed from them.

## Question 8: What would you have done differently?

### Prompts

- Possibly discuss a worker safety plan.

## Questions for supervisees

### Question 1: What is reasonable to expect from a supervisor or organisation after sharing lived experience of family violence or sexual assault?

#### Prompts

- Consider what might be reasonable in terms of the role of supervisor. When might the supervisee look into counselling, an employee assistance program or external supports?
- Explore what is reasonable for a team and a manager around work demands and other team issues.
- Is the supervisee having any difficulties discussing their follow-up needs? Consider ways to have these conversations.

### Question 2: How might a supervisee discuss their expectations with their supervisor?

#### Prompts

- Discuss what support they need and explain the reasons why.
- This question may raise issues around the expectations affecting the broader team and work demands.

### Question 3: What does someone need to feel safe enough to share their own lived experience during supervision?

#### Prompts

- A trusting relationship between supervisor and supervisee or colleagues.
- Practitioners feel they will not be judged, pathologised or stigmatised.
- Practitioners feel confident their information will be kept private unless they consent to it being shared.

### Question 4: How does lived experience fit with other forms of knowledge and skills?

#### Context

Other forms of knowledge and skills include:

- theoretical
- practice wisdom
- emotional intelligence
- cultural knowledge

- values
- reasoning skills.

### Prompts

- Consider the various contributors to knowledge and skills, all of which are valid.

## More resources

For more details on lived experience in the workforce, refer to pages 45 to 47 of the Guidelines.

The Guidelines are available on the [Victorian Government's Best practice supervision guidelines: Family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing | vic.gov.au](https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-government-s-best-practice-supervision-guidelines-family-violence-sexual-assault-and-child-wellbeing)

### Coming out as a survivor in a professional setting

The Safe and Together Institute (SATI) has a podcast, Partnered with a Survivor. The podcast covers a range of topics related to victim-survivors, abuse and systemic issues.

Season 4, episode 2 of the podcast is about being a practitioner and sharing lived experience as a survivor.

- [SATI website's Coming out as a survivor in a professional setting: a practitioner's journey page](https://www.safeandtogetherinstitute.com/season-4-episode-2-coming-out-as-survivor-in-a-professional-setting-a-practitioner-s-journey).<sup>3</sup>

### Aligning the personal with the professional: lived experience as motivation for further education and employment in domestic and family violence

Dr Ilsa Evans is Course Coordinator of the Graduate Certificate in Family Violence at Chisholm Institute. She also sits on the board of Kara Family Violence Service, a local refuge organisation.

Dr Evans conducted an exploratory study in Melbourne on people studying further with the aim of joining the family violence and related sectors. She was interested in people's motivations for doing so. The study had a particular focus on lived experience as a driving force.

The findings were published in *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education* by Australian and New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWWER).

- [ANZSWWER's Aligning the personal with the professional page](https://journal.anzswwer.org/index.php/advances/article/view/297).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <<https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/season-4-episode-2-coming-out-as-survivor-in-a-professional-setting-a-practitioners-journey>>

<sup>4</sup> <<https://journal.anzswwer.org/index.php/advances/article/view/297>>