

Empathy Skills

Reaching for Feelings

Narrator: Kim is a child welfare professional whose work performance for the past two years was good. However, recently, due to a marital crisis resulting in physical violence by her husband, she started coming in late to work a couple of days per week. Co-workers were aware of her crisis and tried for a long time to cover for her. The supervisor heard of her difficulties through the grapevine as well. The supervisor didn't feel comfortable bringing up Kim's personal problems because she feared invading her privacy. Therefore, she said nothing.

As weeks went by, the problems increased. Kim started coming in late most days and was absent more often. Her written work was late, and she was not seeing children on her caseload regularly. The supervisor could no longer ignore the problem, especially since the safety of children was being jeopardized.

Here is a process recording of how she used the skill reaching for feelings:

Supervisor: I wanted to discuss your recent work performance. I've noticed problems in the past month with tardiness, missed days, late written work and not seeing children on your caseload regularly. Generally, you appear to me to be out of it.

Kim: I know things have been going badly, and I have had some extra stress. I'll be able to handle it though.

Supervisor: I've heard that you been having troubles at home. I would think that home troubles would make it hard for you here at work too. I didn't bring up the issue when I first heard about it because I felt it was your personal business. However, I want you to know that I am concerned for you. Has it been rough for you?

Kim: (starting to cry): It's been the toughest time of my life.

Adapted from Shulman, L., (2010). *Interactional Supervision* p. 112.

Acknowledging Feelings

Narrator: Kim went on to describe the current situation she is experiencing with her husband, including how he beat her during an argument. The supervisor listened at first. Then, thought about how to respond. She refrained from taking on the role of a counselor. The supervisor tried first to discuss resources that might be available to help Kim.

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Supervisor: It sounds like you have been going through a very stressful time. Have you had anyone to talk to?

Kim: I've been too ashamed to tell people. I mean, I'm not the kind of person who gets beaten up by a man. That only happens to other people. I didn't come in for four days until my black eye could be covered up by make-up.

Supervisor: So you have been all alone during this.

Kim: That's right.

Supervisor: I can see you are going through a tough time and no one should have to do that by themselves. Have you considered seeing someone about this? For example, the Employee Assistance Program, the family services agency, or even the women's shelter. You are not the only one who has gone through this experience. Just talking about it may give you some relief.

Adapted from Shulman, L. (2010). *Interactional Supervision*, p. 114.

Articulating Feelings

Supervisor: You seem very thoughtful right now. Are you feeling you would be too ashamed to go for help?

Kim: I'm a professional myself. I shouldn't have this happening to me.

Supervisor: Look, this is your life and your problem. I can't tell you what to do about it. But this could happen to anyone. The important thing is getting the help you need so that you don't have to go through this alone. The only reason why I raised the issue is because I thought it might be part of what was making it difficult for you here at work. Now that is my business. Can we talk about what has been going on?

Narrator: The supervisor maintains her sense of purpose and brings the conversation back to the situations affect on work performance, while at the same time continuing to articulate Kim's feelings.

Kim: The thing has hit me so hard I find myself thinking about it all the time. Some mornings I just don't want to get out of bed.

Supervisor: I can understand how bad you must feel and how that would make it difficult to work. However, I'm getting worried, especially about the children on your

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caseload for whom we haven't assessed safety in quite a while. Also, I don't believe you feel good about missing work and having the rest of the unit cover for you.

Although I think it will be difficult, I'm willing to try to help you pull yourself together here at work. I know you are a good caseworker and know you can deal with this. What are your thoughts?

Kim: I could tell people here at work know what is going on. They give me funny looks.

Supervisor: I would think that funny looks would make it harder for you to want to come to work. I think at first, most people, including me, just felt sorry for you but didn't want to say anything. I know that for me, I just hoped that it would go away. But that wasn't very helpful to you. So that is why I decided to talk with you about it today. Can you tell me how you think your situation is affecting the families on your caseload and what we can do about it?

Narrator: The two discussed areas of responsibility that were being affected negatively. The supervisor agreed to make arrangements to modify her duties for a short while until she felt better able to cope. Kim agreed to see a counselor. They agreed to get back together to discuss how things were in a week. At the end of the session, Kim thanks the supervisor for raising the issue and for giving her an opportunity to do something about it.

Adapted from Shulman, L. (2010). *Interactional Supervision*. pp. 114-115.