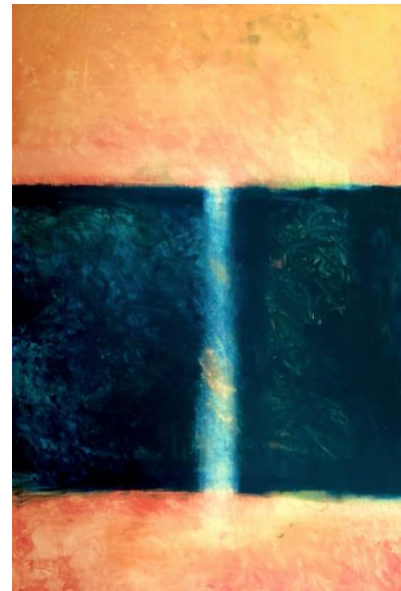


# Safe, Empowered and Grounded: Trauma Informed Supervision

Article by Silvia Purdie,  
in conversation with Liz Pennington  
April 2023

*Painting:  
'Light falling through a dark landscape'  
by Colin McCahon*



Supervision doesn't deal with trauma – take that to counselling – right? Wrong! Our need to draw professional boundaries can lead to the assumption that 'emotional stuff' is not the work of supervision. The rapidly growing body of research and clinical practice around trauma rejects this division. In this article I interview trauma and work-place specialist Liz Pennington about how a trauma informed perspective is vital for supervision.

Trauma is held in layers, built up from experiences that overwhelmed our ability to cope. Life-threatening moments in our stories may be easy to spot but trauma impacts are subjective, and related to how well we were held through unpleasant events. Trauma lives in our nervous system, and impinges on the present by jamming 'on' our 'fight flight freeze' stress response. Trauma keeps us stuck within a narrow range of coping strategies, which end inevitably in exhaustion no matter how hard we try.

The goal of professional supervision, for me at least, is to be fully present and effective in my work. That has to mean addressing trauma, because trauma undermines my ability to be present to other people. And that is only possible when supervision itself is a safe and encouraging. If I am just 'going through motions' turning up for supervision because I have to, I won't bring my trauma vulnerability but will stay in my comfort zone of coping mechanisms. And I won't grow.

As a supervisor I am committed to providing trauma informed practice to my clients, which means learning from the huge amount of work being done in this space internationally and in Aotearoa. So what is trauma informed supervision? It is safe, empowering and grounding.

## Safe

For supervision to be any use at all it must be safe space. Most of my supervision is now online so I cannot create safe physical space – my clients have to work out for themselves where to sit. But I can create safe emotional space, even within the confines of a computer screen. That starts from good listening, the foundation of interesting questions, attentive summary, intuitive leaps, to build trust and enable my client to share with me both the good stuff and the difficult stuff. Trauma care begins with care – "How are you?" – and empathy – "That sounds really tough." At a physiological level, the feeling of being heard and cared for calms the nervous system and releases blood flow through the brain.

In supervision we offer not just one-off debriefs but a commitment to a long term relationship. I commit to being there for my clients. We might only see each other occasionally on a computer screen but I hold them, I pray for them, I believe in them. I want to be a supportive person for them whatever they go through. And through that I see my clients grow in confidence and trust more in their gifts and strengths and have more options in facing challenges.

A key piece here is cultural safety. I am an educated Pākehā. I hold power and privilege. Several of my clients are Pasifika or NZ immigrants, and their safety in supervision depends on me confronting my own assumptions and letting them teach me about their world.

The Relias handbook on Trauma-Informed Care encourages supervisors to “recognize the intersection of culture, background, and gender ... and acknowledge the effects of past trauma (such as racial trauma, minority stress, or gender-based violence)” (p.36).

### **Empowering**

Liz advocates supervision as empowerment from a strengths based kaupapa. For her it is all about partnership and facilitation, to draw on that which the client already knows. “The supervisor is not the one with all the skills.” She sees her job as supervisor as “to empower my clients to utilize the expertise, the skills the connections they already have. I remind and prompt those connections. So people recognise that this is not their first tough experience and they connect with their strengths. This builds hope.” When you had difficult times before, what did you do? What worked? Who is available to support you?

The Relias handbook emphasises empowerment, choice and collaboration as keys to trauma recovery. Supervision is a collaborate process of setting goals. It is space for the supervisee to reflect and articulate her values and priorities, and feel encouraged and affirmed.

### **Grounding**

A trauma perspective is aware of trauma triggers, and the ways that one person’s reactions can trigger reactions in another person. Supervision is an important space to notice what happens in me when I am in a stressful situation. What pushes my buttons? What happens in my body when someone yells at me? And we explore strategies to calm myself down again. Supervision supports us to understand how and why we get triggered, to spot that more quickly and address it more effectively.

Liz works a lot with those in front-line jobs, such as called out for disaster response. She is all too familiar with secondary and vicarious trauma, and the risk of compassion fatigue. “When I finish that work, how am I? What am I left with? Do I need to step out and rest? Do I need to talk to someone right there and then? Hell, yes! I need to be defused. I need support, because I bring my whole self to the work that I'm doing.” Liz would love to see systems of care, such as regular peer-check-in and stand-down periods, built in for those who work with traumatised people. Even just naming and normalising fatigue can be helpful: “These are ‘to be expected’ reactions to an exceptional event.” It instils hope to recognise that, yes, I am tired, I am overwhelmed, but I will rest, I will recover.

Trauma-informed care emphasises physical calming strategies, tangible practical things that bypass our thinking and speak direct to the body. Stop analysing and judging yourself and help your jangled nerves unwind. Liz asks, “What can I do to self soothe? What are the things that calm me?” She suggests making a calming playlist of music, gentle exercise, and looking after your gut health, as part of a range of strategies. “Create space, let yourself feel, embrace silence, sleep more; restoration comes from being able to sleep.”

So what is trauma informed supervision? Liz Pennington summarises as “Supporting people to connect with all that they already know, to all they have experienced, to the things that worked for them in the past, and to the people who are there for them. And to connect with what helps them relax and wind down. That instils hope.”

### Safety questions:

How are you?  
What is happening for you?  
How do you think you're doing?  
What do you need right now?  
What would you like me to share with me?  
When you finish work, what are you left with?

### Empowering questions:

What would you like to discuss today?  
What is your understanding of what has happened?  
When you had difficult times before, what did you do?  
What strengths do you bring to this situation?  
What are you learning?

### Grounding questions:

How do you notice your stress response being triggered?  
What helps you to diffuse this?  
What support do you need?  
How will you access this support?  
What will you do next? What are you doing this evening?  
How are you sleeping? What helps you to sleep better and longer?

### **Some good resources:**

Whāraurau, a national centre for Infant, Child and Adolescent Mental Health (ICAMH) workforce development.

*Heaps of links and resources for trauma informed care, including free online courses.*

<https://wharaurau.org.nz/trauma-informed-care>

*'Trauma-Informed System of Care: Addressing Individuals, Professionals, and Organizations,' Relias. A clear summary of emerging international best practice of trauma-informed care. Includes an assessment tool for compassion fatigue.*

<https://www.relias.com/resource/creating-a-trauma-informed-system-of-care>.

*'Sensory Modulation in Challenging Times,' Te Pou, 2020.*

*Some excellent practical ways to help calm, as well as to help activate energy, especially good for trauma work and self-care.*

<https://www.tepou.co.nz/resources/sensory-modulation-in-challenging-times>

Crisis Intervention and Management Australasia (CIMA)

*A professional network offering training, conferences and resources.*

<https://www.cima.org.au>

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