Mentoring - What it can offer
Carol Chantler

Karen, a Shiatsu practitioner, Tal, her mentor, and I met to talk about mentoring.

Later, when listening to the tape, I heard a lot of laughter. Tal was able to use humour to diffuse what Karen as the mentee, could have seen as quite challenging comments. Karen's ability to engage with that was equally important.

How did you get started?

Karen We met face to face, which meant our relationship developed quickly. I know for others that might not be possible so Skype would definitely be worth trying. We had something else in common besides Shiatsu, which helped to build the relationship at the beginning. I have a background in film making and Tal in editing. I had just done a film for the BSS, and Tal and I spent a few days editing.

What worked well in the sessions?

Tal I provided a space for Karen to talk about what she might be finding difficult in her practice, and we would find a way forward together.

Karen Tal was a very good listener; she didn't come in with “This is how you should do it”. And it's very important that you don’t feel judged.

Tal It can be quite a lonely job, quite isolated. You are often grappling with ethical issues and dilemmas.

Karen I might have a niggly sense something is not quite right. And by talking it through with Tal I can become clearer about it.

Can you give an example of that?

Karen I was working at a particular agency where quite a few clients were potentially suicidal but I didn’t get supervision there. Tal helped me to realise it was serious and that I needed some help. She supervised me for a while and encouraged me to ask for supervision within the agency.

Tal I was a mentor rather than a supervisor.

So you see a real difference between mentoring and supervision?

Tal Yes, it's very important to be clear about that, about the difference between the two roles. Going back to the treatment situation, there are times when you need to break confidentiality, to share within the agency what a client has told you, and talking together helped to identify when that might be.

Were there other situations where the mentoring helped?

Karen I was going to give up my Shiatsu job, I was going away for a while and I always look forward so I just assumed I would give up the job and sort something out again when I came back. And Tal said, “You must be mad!”

Tal (laughter from both) No, I didn’t say you were mad. I said, “Do you realise you can count on the fingers of one hand the number of Shiatsu practitioners who have a job in Shiatsu round here?”
Karen: Tal made me aware I needed to think about why I would give up my job. In the end I decided I just needed someone to take care of it on a temporary basis.

Tal: And juggling different hats. The question is, how do you combine both without them competing with each other?

Karen: Yes, I learned I could not do filming and Shiatsu in the same day. Filming is adrenalised, very Yang - I would just be too tired after filming to do Shiatsu.

I think you said that mentoring helped you with your marketing?

Karen: Well you are saying “Hello world”. That’s difficult for many practitioners. Tal asked “How would Joe Bloggs find you? Would he have to be a very good detective?” And there was some truth in that. I realised I felt ambivalent about putting myself out there. I was not sure about the boundaries between me and potential clients. For me there was an issue of “Will people become too dependent?”

Tal: It was helpful to reframe it, not to say “Look at me I’m brilliant!”, but “This is what Shiatsu can do for you, this is how you can contact me.”

How often did you meet?

Karen: Sometimes we would meet once a month, sometimes not for 6 months. But Tal would always text me after a while to check if I needed a session. We started in 2006 and went right through to this year. And now we are singing raga together!

Tal: Yes it was you that encouraged me to lead raga sessions at the BSS not just in my house.

Karen: So with a mentor, I see it as more of an equal relationship - you both contribute to it.

Tal: When we reached a certain point I felt that Karen was able to manage without a mentor. I said to her, “You are an experienced practitioner now; we can meet as colleagues.”

Karen: Yes but then I had a crisis, I said “You have to come out of early retirement - get off that beach and come back here!”

Tal: It was something that was really tricky, something that Karen definitely needed help with.

Karen: It was a situation of conflict with another person. With Tal I was able to talk it through calmly. It didn’t resolve it straight away, but it gave me a way through, a way to start tackling it.

So mentoring was, and is, flexible - if Tal needed to come back as a mentor that was OK?

Tal: Yes it’s OK to put that hat back on again from time to time. But also Karen was getting other sources of help which showed she had matured as a practitioner.

Karen: Once when I had a real problem, I couldn’t get hold of Tal. Instead, I talked to a friend who is a Life Coach. We agreed to do a swap, Life Coaching for Shiatsu, and it has been very helpful.

Did you get training to help you be a mentor?

Tal: I had two weekends of training which was very useful. It helped me to be clear about the mentor role. We looked at other roles - teacher, colleague, supervisor, counsellor, and identified the mentor role and how that differed from the other roles. We practised mentoring on each other.

I think that clear understanding of the role through that sort of training is particularly important for teachers because some might see their role as quite close to mentoring but it is actually very different.

Karen: I think, for me, it was better to have a mentor who was not a part of my course. There was a freedom to talk about my practice in a way that might have been difficult with a teacher. If you have someone who is more on an equal footing with you rather than someone you are looking up to, then you are more likely to grow.
A couple of things stand out for me from this exchange:

- The importance of the mentor being very clear about boundaries - theirs and those of other people in the situations that they are discussing.
- Being a mentor is not about someone handing down advice but providing a space to work together on issues.

Footnotes:
Anyone who thinks they might be interested in raga singing at Finsbury Park (BSS) and wants to find out more, contact Tal at talcalthrop@blueyonder.co.uk

To find out about mentoring, contact the office.