Teachers, like all people, have personal problems from time to time. Supervisors, in order to fulfill their responsibilities for helping teachers become more effective in the classroom, need to have guidelines for helping the teacher who is in the throes of a personal problem. The supervisor may become aware of the problem through another staff member, through noticing some unusual behavior in or out of the classroom, or through an outside person—a parent or a child. If the teacher-supervisor relationship is close, the teacher may come to the supervisor with the problem. In any case, when the supervisor becomes aware that a problem exists, it is his/her responsibility to assist the teacher in restoring instructional effectiveness.

Supervisory literature almost completely avoids the subject, probably because it is filled with complexities and dangers for the supervisor. This is characteristic of the field of supervision, which has a history of ignoring its more difficult, complex problems.

For the supervisor who is willing to deal with the teacher who has a personal problem, but is not quite sure which way or how far to go, some guidelines will be offered here.

**Background**

Teaching is a highly personal act. What the teacher is personally and how he/she feels affects what happens in the classroom. It is therefore necessary that the supervisor, in addition to discussing issues concerning teaching and learning, must respond to the teacher as a person if he/she is to have a positive influence on the teacher's work.
Although the primary job of the supervisor is to help teachers become more instructionally effective, Mosher and Purpel state that the teacher's need for ego counseling is an important responsibility of supervision. They delineate areas of supervisory need for teachers that must be met by the supervisor in an individualized and intensive fashion. Among the most important of these supervisory objectives are:

1. The teacher's achievement of emotional insight and the search for new adaptive behavior to appropriately reflect the emotional growth that takes place;
2. The teacher's ability to handle the stress caused by teaching;
3. The teacher's ability to self-evaluate and self-supervise;
4. The teacher's knowledge of him/herself. These segments of supervisory responsibility are all concerned with the teacher's growth as a human being as well as a professional.

As the relationship between the teacher and the supervisor becomes trusting, the teacher may begin to express more personal thoughts and feelings to the supervisor. The supervisor should then observe more, listen more, and talk less. Supervisors who have learned and sharpened their communication skills have a great advantage here.

Although the teacher-supervisor relationship should be collegial in nature, the teacher who has a personal problem severe enough to detract from classroom effectiveness needs the supervisor's immediate assistance. As the problem is solved, the supervisor should return to his/her objective of collegiality in the teacher-supervisor relationship. An excellent discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities of the helping relationship and the collegial relationship may be found in Chapter V of Clinical Supervision, by Morris L. Cogan.

The Dangers

Although the supervisor should be a good listener, he/she should not be lured into playing psychiatrist. The supervisor may not "do his/her own thing" in this situation. Instead, the supervisor must be keenly aware of his/her own personal limitations and assets, and those of the profession he/she is identified with. Educational supervisors are usually not qualified to analyze and deal with deep-seated personality patterns.

How far the supervisor should go in using listening skills, confronting skills, and supporting skills when dealing with a teacher's personal problem is a matter for objective, professional judgment. If there is any doubt as to the need for specialized help, the supervisor should seek other, more specialized judgment.

Human Conditions of Concern

In dealing with a teacher with a serious personal problem, it is useful if the supervisor can recognize some of the main human conditions of concern. These are loss, internal distress, and transitional states.

Loss occurs when the individual experiences the deprivation of someone or something important to him/her. This state may result from the shock caused by the death of a spouse or a close friend, the loss of one's job, a divorce, and so on. Internal distress concerns the state of the individual's feelings and is usually caused by a shock or a prolonged period of stress. Feelings of depression or hopelessness are in this category. Being in a transitional state refers to persons who are subjected to longer periods of tension-producing dynamic situations, such as family conflict, illness, job change, and so on.

Recognizing these problem areas and the emotional state of the teacher (grief-stricken, anxious, distressed) are important to the supervisor in making decisions as to what next steps should be taken.

4 Cogan, op. cit., p. 62.
Referral Skills

The most accessible resources for assistance are usually found in the school building or school district. The initial contact will often be the only contact the supervisor needs to make, since the specialist needed will probably want to deal directly with the teacher and/or make another more specialized referral. The supervisor's line superior should, of course, be consulted and apprised, and if no specialist is available in the school district, the superior must become involved in any decisions about going into the community for help.

Knowledge of existing community resources (school, school district, public agencies, private agencies, and so on) and the kinds of services they provide is a crucial necessity for the supervisor. He/she should also remember that all work done in this area is highly confidential, and that no information may be released to any referral source or agency without the helpee's written permission.

Here is a suggested model that incorporates sound referral principles:

1. Explore the teacher's readiness for referral.

2. Be direct and honest about observations that led you to suggest referral. Be sensitive to the words you use and their possible effect on the person—"Let's explore some possible resources" would probably be more appropriate than "It's beyond me! Go get straightened out!"

3. Try to determine what other persons have had contact with the teacher and consider the feasibility of conferring with them before deciding on next steps.

4. If possible, encourage the helpee to make his/her own contacts for referral.6

The supervisor will rarely be involved beyond these steps, since at that point a specialist or a superior should be directly involved. The supervisor's direct role will then either cease or become supportive of the specialist's recommendations.

If you are convinced that the teacher needs more specialized or concentrated help than you can provide:

1. Encourage the teacher to see his/her own doctor, psychiatrist, or minister, but if that is not favored by the teacher, then the supervisor should:

2. Discuss the problem with a superior and receive approval to consult (appropriately) the school psychologist, the school social worker, the guidance counselor, the district pupil services director, or the district medical consultant. If this cannot be done:

3. Ask the superior to get help from an appropriate member of the community, then assume a supportive role to the superior and/or the specialist.

6 Brammer, op. cit., pp. 131-32.

---

Anthony P. Mattaliano is Visiting Assistant Professor of Education, University of Massachusetts; and Principal, Plant Junior High School, West Hartford, Connecticut.