

# Supervision Questions:

## How many clients should I see in a day?

A Question of Capacity

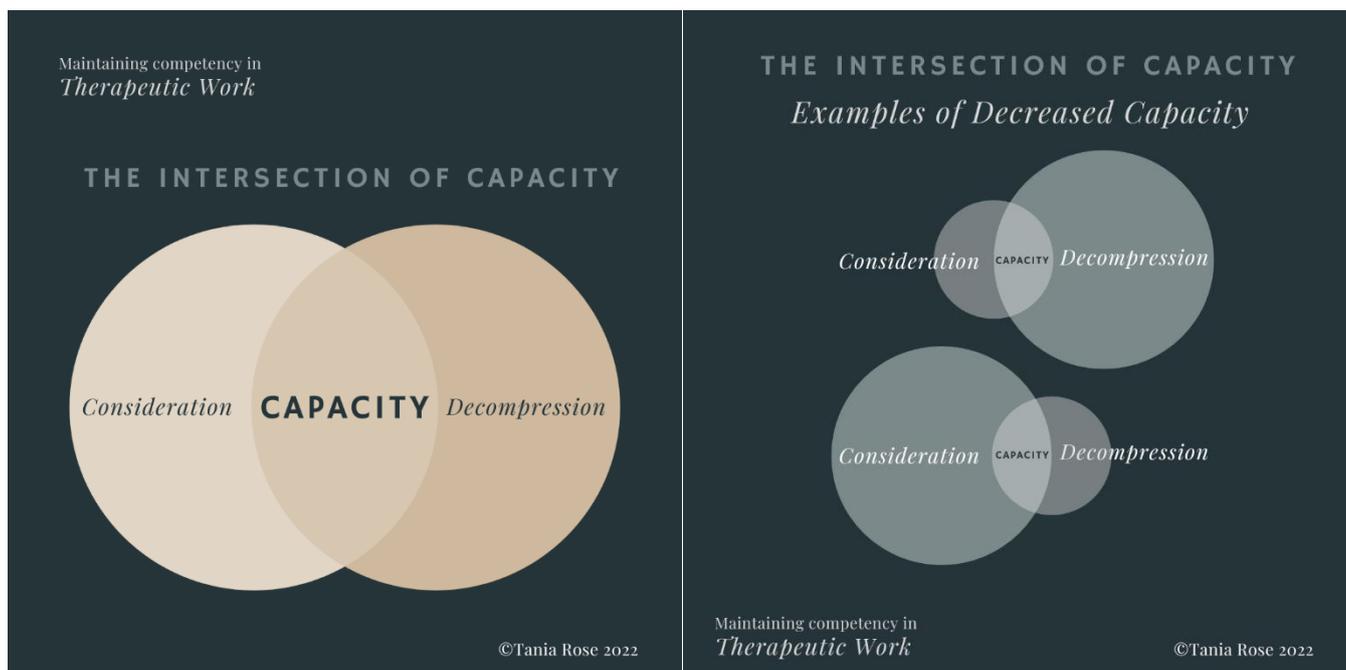
TANIA J ROSE

As a supervisor I witness therapist & counsellor burnout, which impacts me greatly. Research shows that once a practitioner has experienced burnout, they are very likely to experience it again, and each time puts them more at risk. So how do we answer a question like this? Do we think about it in terms of sessions, hours, breaks, days, our working week?

Burnout isn't just being tired or feeling rushed. Burnout is a psychological syndrome, a response to prolonged stressors (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). It's a specific work-related stress that has physical exhaustion symptoms. In relation to ongoing stress, it would be remis of me to not consider the current conditions for practitioners. Prolonged stress in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic has added additional dimensions to the experience of working in mental health. We understand that stressful situations are risk factors for poor mental health such as depression and anxiety (Kujawa et.al, 2020). Pandemic Stress is very real and although normalized due to the whole world being exposed, it does not make it any less impactful on us as well as our clients.

I like to frame the potential capabilities of mental health practitioners in terms of the Intersection of Capacity, a living combination of consideration and decompression. A place in the middle where those two elements meet. Many things diminish our capacity and when our capacity is limited, we can ask ourselves how present we are being with our clients? Are we or even can we show up with acute attention for them? In terms of sustainability, are we attuned to our capacity and how do we identify with that capacity?

Emerging practitioners may put a lot of consideration into their work ethically as well as therapeutically, however it has been my experience with supervisees that often there can be a block when it comes to the in-between time; the time when a practitioner can come back to themselves, can arrive at calmness and care for the self. I refer to this time taken for rejuvenation and psychological repair as Decompression; the process of releasing pressure and returning to a state of normalcy.



The Intersection of Capacity and Examples of Decreased Capacity ©Tania J Rose 2022

When we combine consideration and decompression, we create an intersection of Capacity; a potential ability to receive, contain, and perform. It's important to note that this capacity is not finite. It is a living state of being, easily disrupted and needing constant restoration. When a practitioner feels overwhelmed or incapacitated, they may look to considerations for answers and disregard decompression needs, which may shift the weight of awareness.

There is a delicate balance necessary to create the right conditions for maintaining one's capacity to spend all our working hours in the therapeutic frame. Our work is not easy. There are no prescriptive remedies for helping those who seek us our care, and no secret training formulas which will protect us from the depleting elements of our work. Our humanness is both our strength and our weakness in the helping professions, and we must take it upon ourselves to find ways we can show-up day after day, week after week, year after year and maintain ethical standards which enable us to be completely present in the best possible condition for our clients.

Our capacity for the work that we do lies in the intersection between our consideration and our decompression. It's a balance that need constant maintenance. The diagrams above can be a helpful tool to conceptualise this intersection. When our circle of consideration becomes smaller, it affects the size of our capacity, and likewise when our decompression is lesser our capacity will be impacted. If we spend most of our energies in consideration without decompression, our capacity will become untenable, and likewise the other way.

It up to us to find ways to maintain a balance, which can be difficult. Cultural norms of job dissatisfaction can bring feelings of guilt for taking "time off" between clients. The ideas that you are not working during decompression time and might be considered "lazy" or "sensitive" don't help our plight. Yet there is plenty of work happening during decompression. We are trying to come back to us, to the self that resides within us, which can be fraught with all the challenges of being human. Reconnecting with ourselves is important if we are to maintain our capacity. We care for others, which is often why we come to the profession, but unless we care deeply for ourselves, we will have very little to offer our clients.

So, how many clients should we see in a day? Perhaps the question could be better framed as "what is my ongoing and maintainable capacity for my workdays, factoring in depleting elements such as my personal life, the complexity of my cases, and my working hours?". Your answer might be one or two. It might be five. There is no right answer, but you can work it out by considering how much time it takes generally for you to arrive back to yourself after a session.

Many experienced practitioners have told me that an hour between clients and a hard cap on daily client numbers is imperative to maintain longevity in the profession. I decompress for at least one hour between sessions as a general rule. Outside of that and I become aware of my capacity depleting, no matter how much consideration I put into my work. Thinking about capacity as being a fluid construct that is living and needing maintenance, care and compassion like any living thing can be a good place to begin.

©Tania J Rose 2022

#### References

Kujawa, A., Green, H., Compas, B. E., Dickey, L., & Pegg, S. (2020). Exposure to COVID-19 pandemic stress: Associations with depression and anxiety in emerging adults in the United States. *Depression and anxiety*, 37(12), 1280-1288.

Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World psychiatry : official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 15(2), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311>