Practice Tool

Team as secure base model in online and hybrid spaces

Introduction

The concept of the secure base comes from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) in which our relationships with significant others who are available, sensitive to our needs and reliable, provide us with a safe haven to return to when life is stressful. They also provide us with comforting internal mental models when we are physically away from significant others.

These secure attachments enable us to engage with the world and help us remain resilient when life is stressful. In the context of emotionally demanding occupations, practice supervisors and their teams often provide a work-related secure base.

The team as secure base model was developed as part of the Economic and Social Research Council-funded research project 'Emotional Intelligence in Social Work 2012-15' and is a revised version of Schofield and Beek's secure base model used with foster carers.

In recent years, many practitioners have changed the way they work to incorporate online or hybrid practices. These changes have had a significant impact on informal learning and communication within and between teams (Cook, Zschomler, Biggart & Carder, 2020).
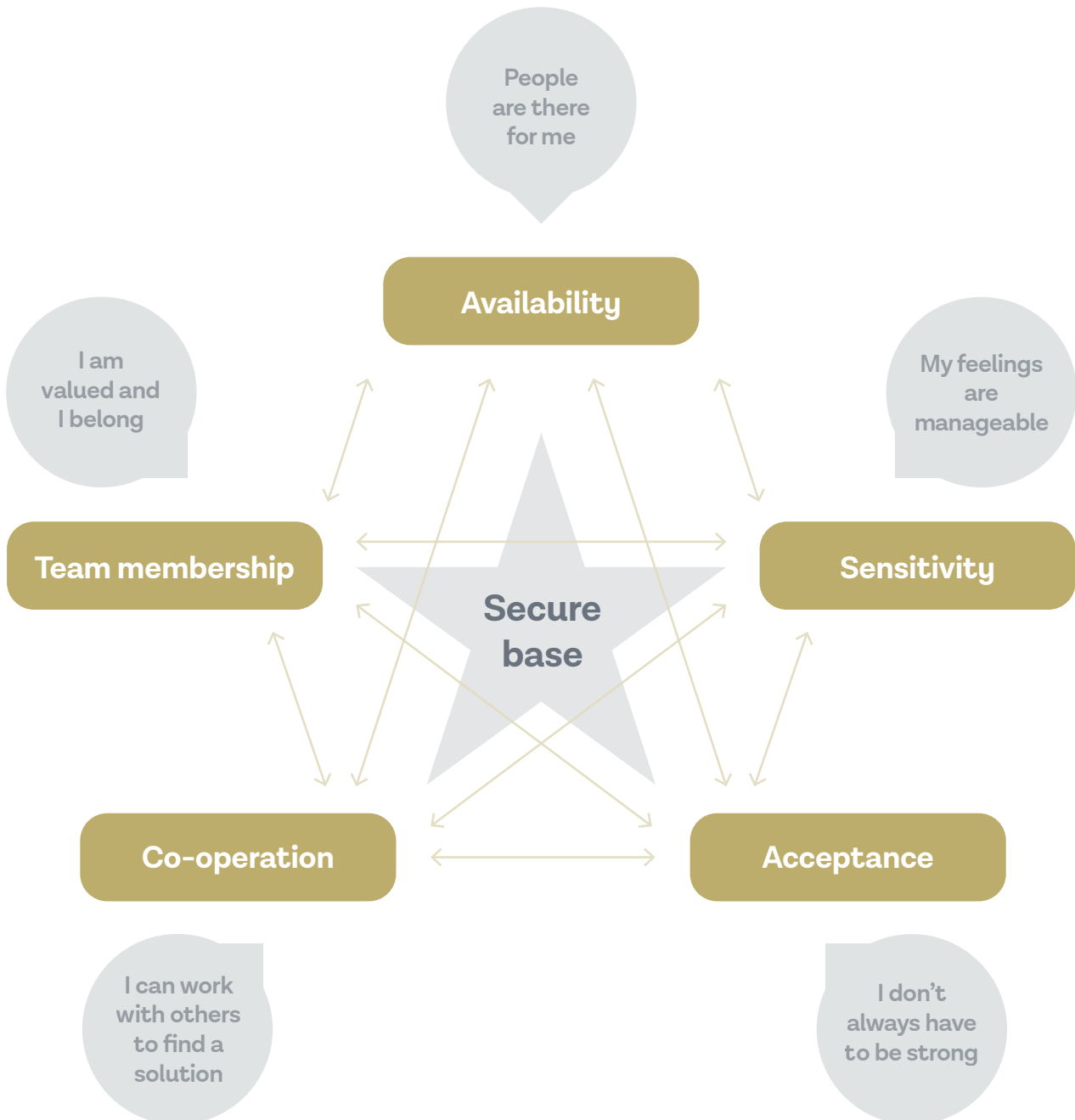
This tool considers how the team as secure base model can be implemented in online and hybrid settings.

The model (pictured on the next page) can be used by practice supervisors to reflect on how they can promote a secure base for their team across five different domains:

> availability

> sensitivity

> acceptance

> co-operation

> team membership.

Summary information about each of the different domains is provided alongside a series of reflective questions, which prompt you to consider how this model might be relevant to your team.

The team as a secure base model

People
are there
for me

Availability

I am
valued and
I belong

My feelings
are
manageable

Team membership

Sensitivity

**Secure
base**

Co-operation

Acceptance

I can work
with others
to find a
solution

I don't
always have
to be strong

Reflecting on the model

The following suggestions are designed to promote reflection on the challenges and opportunities of online and hybrid working for teams. Each domain of 'team as a secure base' is broken down and explored in four stages:

1. General considerations: these help identify the current situation for your team.

2. Fine tuning: these consider what could be improved for the team in developing the 'team as a secure base' in an online or hybrid working environment.

3. Sustaining practice: these consider what work might be needed to change processes or practice in the longer term to foster the development of 'team as a secure base' in an online or hybrid working environment.

4. Practical considerations: these consider what practical or technical issues might need to be addressed that might hinder or promote 'team as a secure base' in online or hybrid working environments.

Domain 1: Availability

Teams work well as a secure base when team members are available, physically, or emotionally, in real time or virtually, and can rely on each other to be available.

Stage 1 - General considerations:
What is currently happening in your team to enable availability?

How available are you to your team? Have you discussed this thoroughly with your team and do you understand their views?

Do team members / your supervisees know the best way (and feel confident) to contact you when you are working at home? Have you asked them directly about this?

How do you (and other team members) signal your availability when working away from the office?

What is the team culture of 'checking in' with each other when working virtually?

How do you balance online and office-based work in your team?

What opportunities are there for team members to receive informal peer support online?

How do you support the management of work boundaries between working hours and private life when working from home? Do you advocate and role model a healthy work-life balance to support your team's wellbeing?

How do you use video and audio conferencing to connect teammates?

What might the specific challenges be for staff from minoritised groups? How might these be overcome?

Stage 2 - Fine tuning:
What could be improved in your team to enable greater availability?

How could you address issues around availability which your team has identified? How could you involve the team in generating ideas?

How can you help your team manage the blurred boundaries between work and home life?

When working online, how might team members proactively signal their availability to colleagues across the team?

When team members are working away from each other, how might you foster a culture of checking in with colleagues?

When working virtually, how could you create opportunities for team members to meet informally for reflective discussions?

Stage 3 - Sustaining practice:
How could practices enabling availability be sustained in the long term?

What are you, your organisation and your team doing to plan for hybrid working in the longer term?

How do you create and maintain online peer support forums as well as management support?

How will you ensure support will be available for new team members, particularly those joining in the context of online / hybrid team working?

How do team members signal their areas of expertise or specialisms to the rest of the team? (For instance, you could consider creating team member profiles so that colleagues can see who is able to help them with a specific practice issue).

Stage 4 - Practical considerations:
What technical support needs to be in place to enable availability?

How do you maintain visibility across online and hybrid spaces? For example, sharing electronic diaries, online consultation slots, instant messaging for quick questions?

How do you identify and address technical disparities within your team?

What might be the optimal mix of video, email, and phone availability for your team?

Domain 2: Sensitivity

Team members who are sensitive to each other's needs instill a sense of confidence that the emotional demands of the work can be processed and managed. Demonstrating empathy (e.g., by noticing other people's feelings, offering advice or opportunities to talk) or sympathy (e.g., offering tea or food) can help workers to cope with the stresses of work. Team members tune in to different circumstances and cultural viewpoints, all of which can provide different perspectives on what affects team members.

Stage 1 - General considerations:
What is currently happening in your team to enable sensitivity?

Proactive and regular checking-in with individual workers is vitally important – when you and your supervisees are working virtually, how would you notice if they were struggling?

When working virtually, how do you find out whether work is going well for your supervisees?

How often do you see your supervisees online vs face-to-face? How might this affect your awareness of their wellbeing?

How do you recognise and respond to non-verbal cues of colleagues? Do you seek people out rather than wait for people to come to you?

Do you have a 'cameras on' culture in your team? If not, how could you create this?

How do you respond if you sense a team member is struggling during an online interaction (e.g., a team meeting)?

When working virtually, how do you know whether your supervisee is working late or over their hours?

How might current working arrangements (e.g., working at home) affect the ability of team members to notice the needs of their colleagues?

To what extent do team members contact each other when working virtually? Are they more or less aware of each other's work as a result?

What might the specific challenges be for staff from minoritised groups? How might these be overcome?

Stage 2 - Fine tuning:
What could be improved in your team to enable greater sensitivity?

How might home circumstances affect the extent to which team members feel confident about sharing vulnerability?

Are you aware of how your supervisees find working from home and any factors that may affect their experience (e.g. insufficient space, caring responsibilities, tech issues, psychological home / work boundary blurring)?

Is any team member more vulnerable or at risk from virtual working? Would anyone need more specific support?

How do you identify those who are at greater risk of any negative impacts of virtual working and what their needs might be?

In what ways do you take account of privacy and sensitivity for colleagues working from home when talking to them about their wellbeing?

How do you check-in with new team members or those who may be reluctant to tell you or otherwise communicate that they are struggling?

How do you ensure that team members are kept up to date with organisational context and change that is relevant to them?

How do you notice and anticipate when your supervisee may be nervous or need additional support (e.g., 'firsts' like court, chairing a key meeting, etc.)?

How do you create sensory friendly online spaces (e.g., using different visual and sound stimuli) to encourage engagement of colleagues online?

Stage 3 - Sustaining practice:
How could practices enabling sensitivity to be sustained in the long term?

If you don't see colleagues every day in the office, how do you anticipate the support needs of your supervisee? Do you check-in with them about their plans or become familiar with their online diary? Perhaps you might say something like, 'I know you have a difficult home visit coming up. Shall we arrange to check in afterwards?'

How do online ways of staying in touch affect team members' relationships with each other? Consider communication protocols for online chat forums, where informal or hastily written comments can come across as rude, judgmental, or insensitive.

When working online, how could you connect supervisees with opportunities for learning (e.g., shadowing colleagues on virtual home visits and setting up mentoring or 'buddying' sessions)?

How could you support team members to get to know each other better and therefore enable them to recognise each other's support needs?

Stage 4 - Practical considerations:
What technical support needs to be in place to enable sensitivity?

How do you identify and address different technical needs of team members?

How do you identify and address the different working patterns and contexts (e.g., office / online balance) of team members?

Domain 3: Acceptance

Team members who can provide constructive help and advice when things go wrong show an understanding that everyone makes mistakes, and that it's unrealistic to expect to be perfect all the time. Beliefs around the need to be seen as 100% competent at work can create unrealistic expectations, which can lead to stress.

Stage 1 - General considerations:
What is currently happening in your team to enable acceptance?

Does your supervisee feel confident to participate in online meetings – specifically to discuss a problem or a worry with their work?

How do you encourage / invite participation during online meetings?

Are there different ways to participate to suit different needs or preferences (e.g., chat function / smaller groups / space for reflection)?

When working virtually, what opportunities are there for your supervisee to receive informal feedback on their work?

When working online, how confident are team members to seek advice if they are struggling (or are worried they have made a mistake)?

If team meetings take place online, what opportunities are there for an informal chat about the work?

When you need to provide constructive feedback to your supervisee, how do you choose whether to do this online or in-person?

When working virtually, how do team members support each other when a piece of work has not gone well?

When working virtually, how do team members celebrate their successes together, (e.g., after a visit)?

How do colleagues reflect on their work to identify learning and skill acquisition?

What might the specific challenges be for staff from minoritised groups? How might these be overcome?

Stage 2 - Fine tuning:
What could be improved in your team to enable greater acceptance?

How do you create a non-judgmental culture which encourages everyone to generate 'good enough' solutions to enable progress?

How do you build trust in hybrid spaces that enable people to feel confident enough to share their struggles and vulnerabilities?

How could you help team members working from home to feel supported when they encounter a setback?

If colleagues return home rather than to the office after a practice visit, how easy is it for your supervisee to ask for a debrief or to discuss a piece of work that didn't go well?

How do you ensure that your supervisee remains accountable for their work when working virtually?

Stage 3 - Sustaining practice:
How could practices enabling acceptance be sustained in the long term?

How can meetings be facilitated or chaired to ensure people are engaged and feel heard? For example, could you have a rotating Chair or use part of the meeting to discuss a current issue or complex piece of work?

How can chat forums be managed to encourage learning and be solutions-focused? For example, could you have an informal moderator of chat forums whose role is facilitative and constructive, and guides conversations towards solutions?

What opportunities can be created for team members to be involved in collective goal setting and review?

How might you build opportunities for both individual and collective debrief after difficult practice experiences?

Following a setback, how might you create non-blaming opportunities for team discussion and learning?

Stage 4 - Practical considerations:

Practical considerations: what technical or process issues need to be in place to enable acceptance?

How do you decide on the relevant platform for communication (e.g., chat forum, email etc.)?

How can chat forums be moderated? How can ground rules be created for engaging with online forums and for the management of them?

Domain 4: Co-operation

Team members who work together to provide direction and give advice help each other feel confident that solutions to problems will be found. This helps alleviate feelings of isolation, which can be a source of stress.

Stage 1 - General considerations:
What is currently happening in your team to enable co-operation?

How do you come to a consensus about task sharing in the team?

How do you agree what is 'fair' in task allocation?

How do you encourage skills sharing amongst your team?

What is the process by which you make decisions and reach consensus?

How do you offer opportunities to reflect on practice when working virtually?

When working virtually, what opportunities do team members have to learn from each other?

When working virtually, how do you know if your team is working well together?

How do team members collaborate if they are working virtually?

How do you create spaces for collaborative teamwork online? For example, do you create online spaces with no agenda - virtual 'water-cooler meetings' - to compensate for the loss of ad hoc office discussions?

What might the specific challenges be for staff from minoritised groups? How might these be overcome?

Stage 2 - Fine tuning:
What could be improved in your team to enable greater co-operation?

In what ways do you promote virtual communities of practice, i.e., a network of individuals who share an area of interest and communicate about it online' (Olson & Olson, 2013, p.7)?

How do team members share everyday practice wisdom when working online?

When working virtually, how do you ensure your supervisees have opportunities to observe colleagues? For example, how might you promote vicarious learning via scheduled 'office time' even when there is no formal meeting scheduled? Or how might you consider 'virtual shadowing'?

Are interactions documented (who is doing what and when) and visible to the team?

When meeting online, do team members introduce themselves and their roles to newcomers?

What are team members' beliefs about what is a 'fair' task allocation and how do these beliefs match up with organisation processes for task allocation?

When working virtually, how do team members know when / how / if a colleague needs cover or help with a specific task?

How might you create an inclusive environment allowing greater co-operation between members from diverse backgrounds and with differing viewpoints?

Stage 3 - Sustaining practice:
How could practices enabling co- operation be sustained in the long term?

How could you create greater opportunities for team members to be involved in team goal setting and review? For example, via annual away days organised by different members of the team? Or by including issues affecting the team each quarter for discussion at team meetings?

When working virtually, what opportunities do team members have to talk through their reasoning and decision making?

How might you respond to colleagues who find hybrid team work more challenging?

Where immediate solutions are difficult due to organisational constraints, how can team members ensure their voices are heard at an organisational level? How can team members be kept up to date about wider organisational issues?

Where individual team members appear marginalised, how might you address this within the team?

How might you build learning opportunities into the everyday activities of the team?

Stage 4 - Practical considerations:
What technical or process issues need to be in place to enable co-operation?

How do you draw on technological tools to enhance online and hybrid collaboration (e.g., whiteboards, Doodle, group chats, OneDrive, breakout rooms, etc.)?

How often and in what ways do you and your team share or signpost online resources, links, best practices, or upcoming events?

How do you make best use of online forums, portals, blogs, platforms, sharing practices and MS Teams shared folders?

How does remote working affect co-operation between team members? What are the disadvantages and new opportunities?

Domain 5: Team belonging

Shared ownership of work, and recognition of each other as both colleagues and human beings, helps social workers to believe they are valued and belong, which helps sustain self-worth.

Stage 1 - General considerations:
What is currently happening in your team to enable belonging?

How do you induct new members of the team?

How do you ensure that new team members get to shadow more experienced members of the team?

Where team members frequently work away from the office, how do you welcome newcomers to the team?

When working virtually, how do you induct new members and help them get to know their colleagues?

What routines has your team developed for hybrid working and how have these affected the sense of 'belonging' and team identity?

How often does the team meet as a whole and does this happen online or in person?

How do you hold inclusive online meetings?

What might the specific challenges be for staff from minoritised groups? How might these be overcome?

Stage 2 - Fine tuning:
What is currently happening in your team to enable belonging?

How do you ensure name, roles and team membership are visible on online forums and during virtual interactions?

How do you create a sense of team belonging in a hybrid or virtual work setting?

In the context of increased virtual working, how might you retain some opportunities for meeting in-person to strengthen team identity?

When working virtually, how do you mark important events for team members (e.g., passing ASYE, achieving CPD qualifications, parental leave, retirement etc.)?

To what extent is the team aware of (and able to value) the specialisms and skills of individual members?

What are your new 'norms' and expectations for inclusive team communication?

How do you promote the sharing of knowledge and skills online?

How do you recognise diversity within the team and the skills individuals bring to the hybrid / virtual experience?

Stage 3 - Sustaining practice:
How could practices enabling belonging be sustained in the long term?

In what ways could you enable team social networking sites that are both social and task related?

When working virtually, how could the team create a greater sense of belonging for all members?

How might your induction processes need to be adjusted for increased virtual and hybrid working?

When working online, how could you manage the induction of new members so that they feel part of the team?

When team members return to work after a period of absence (e.g., following maternity, paternity, adoption, or sick leave), what additional support might help them feel part of the team again?

How might you support and respond to colleagues who don't feel like part of the team?

How might you create inclusive online spaces for all team members (e.g., by developing ground rules for online spaces and exploring what would be most useful for each individual person)?

Stage 4 - Practical considerations:
What technical or process issues need to be in place to enable belonging?

How might digital exclusion (i.e. lack of skills, confidence or motivation, or issues with access) affect the extent to which individuals feel part of the daily life of the team?

How could you promote an inclusive user experience of the technology used in your work?

References

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