



TRELLIS SOCIETY

Reflective Practice Mentorship Pilot Program

Design Framework and Implementation Guide

Prepared for the Trellis Society
Catamount: A Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers
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FOR THE PROGRAM COORDINATOR



A Note on This Document

This document was produced as part of the Catamount Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers at Mount Royal University, in community partnership with the Trellis Society ("Trellis") and under the faculty mentorship of Dr. Leda Stawnychko.

The Catamount Fellowship is an interdisciplinary learning experience offered by Mount Royal University's Institute for Community Prosperity. The senior level Mount Royal University students selected for the Fellowship work in collaboration with their community partner and faculty mentor and use social innovation frameworks, experiential learning, and deep listening to explore the root causes of a community identified complex social issue. This Reflective Practice Mentorship Pilot Program is one of the deliverables prepared in response to the following wicked problem:

How might we effectively support early career social service workers in developing skills needed to work with youth and families and to thrive, grow, and be retained in the sector?

The author, Ayden Osvath, has a Bachelor in Communication, Major in Information Design and Minor in Social Innovation. This framework and the recommendations that follow are not drawn from personal experience as a social service practitioner. They are grounded in a structured literature review and a review of best practices on reflective practice, mentorship, burnout, and early career support in social work and other social service fields. In addition, the framework incorporates feedback collected during a May 12, 2026, Trellis community engagement session.

A key feature of the proposed Reflective Practice Mentorship Pilot Program is that it is designed to meet the organizational realities of Trellis while remaining adaptable and scalable to meet not just existing but also future needs of Trellis. Trellis' own knowledge of its organization, workforce, and culture will shape the implementation and management of the Reflective Practice Mentorship Pilot Program.

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Section 1: Program Rationale

Early career social service workers ("**social workers** or **social work practitioners**"), especially in the field of child and family services, face a transition gap between their academic studies and the lived reality of professional practice. Research is consistent in identifying a persistent problem: the first two to three years of professional practice is the time when social workers are most vulnerable to negative impacts on health and mental wellbeing, burnout, and voluntary departure from the practice of social work. This is an international problem, not just a Canadian problem, and certainly not a problem specific or unique to Trellis. [1, 2, 3, 4]

International research suggests that new social workers must navigate a real gap between the theory and the practical skills of relational work, emotional regulation, and managing difficult conversations. Post secondary education alone does not fully develop these skills. Instead, these skills develop deliberately and intentionally with the support of high quality relational guidance as the new social worker gains lived experience in their field of practice. [2, 5]

Trellis currently provides administrative supervision, the structured oversight of caseloads, reporting obligations, and performance expectations. This is a necessary and valuable process for most organizations. What is often found to be missing is a parallel, protected relationship in which new workers can process the relational and emotional dimensions of their practice: the weight of difficult cases, ethical practice, the complexity of power dynamics with families, the complexity of power dynamics between the social worker and the family, and the experience of sitting with someone in crisis. [11]

Research from multiple countries documents a recurring pattern in which organizational governance, administrative supervision, and the structural pressures of caseloads, audits, and reporting demands, drifts toward case management and output review at the expense of the developmental and emotional functions new workers are often missing but require to thrive. In contrast, reflective and relational practice builds capacity, supports resilience, increases emotional reserves, supports wellbeing, and improves both job satisfaction and quality of practice when embedded within an organization's culture. [6, 7, 8, 11]

Formal mentorship in social work comes with measurable improvements in career success and satisfaction for both the mentee and the mentor. The design of this Reflective Practice Mentorship program ("**Program**") uses a structured mentorship model for the very reason that it benefits both the new worker and the experienced practitioner. [9]

This pilot proposes to test the Program and, over time, embed it within Trellis' existing structure and culture. Significantly, it is designed to run without additional financial cost to the organization. However, to be effective, both the mentor and mentee must commit time to the Program. Further, the support of Trellis to allow this Program to be incorporated into the work routine of the participants is

necessary. Asking participants to undertake this Program outside of work may reduce uptake and may signal a lack of commitment or support on the part of Trellis.

Critically, what this Program will offer is individualized support and development. Each Mentee comes to Trellis with their own strengths, their own weaknesses, and their own lived experiences. During their professional practice each Mentee will experience different cases, different family dynamics, different challenges, and different outcomes. As each Mentee's experience is processed in their own way, the Mentee's growth as practitioner will vary, setbacks and plateaus may occur at unexpected times, and each Mentee will require different supports at different times. Working one on one with each Mentee accepts these differences while continuing to build each Mentee's capacity and resilience and support their well being.

Why This Program is Different from Administrative Supervision

Administrative supervision focuses on task completion, case outcomes, documentation compliance, and performance evaluation. Reflective Practice Mentorship focuses on the inner life of practice: how the worker is experiencing the work, what is being activated in them personally, how they are making sense of difficult relational dynamics, and whether they are developing the emotional resilience to sustain their practice long term. Both are necessary and neither can replace the other.

The Naming Question

The language used to describe the mentor's role in this Program is structural, not cosmetic, with several alternatives considered. Two were rejected for specific reasons:

- "Supervisor" carries evaluative and administrative weight that undermines the psychological safety the role requires.
- "Mentor," on its own and without a qualifier, implies casual career guidance separate from practice.

This document proposes the title **Reflective Practice Mentor ("RPM")** as the formal name for the role:

- "Reflective" because the orientation is toward processes and meaning making, not task completion.
- "Practice" because the work is grounded in the reality of front-line social service practice.
- "Mentor" because the relationship is developmental, non-evaluative, and draws on the established evidence base for formal mentorship in social work.

Section 2: Pilot Program Design

Scope and Eligibility

To manage the Program, Trellis should appoint a Program Coordinator to recruit RPMs, create initial pairings, any required repairing, and outcome tracking. The Program includes each early career social worker at Trellis who is in their first or second year of professional practice, with the option to include those in their third year of professional practice. Enrollment is automatic and universal. It is neither selective nor is it remedial. This is a deliberate design choice. A program offered only to the struggling social worker carries a stigma that undermines the very purpose of this Program. Further, the goal is to develop, build, and strengthen the Mentee's resilience before struggles manifest, not during or after. Finally, global participation may serve to strengthen Trellis overall.

Program Element	Detail
Eligible Mentees	All Trellis social workers in Year 1 and Year 2 of professional practice with the option to include Year 3.
Pairing Rule	The RPM and Mentee may work in the same group or team, however, developing relationships across teams has value. The RPM may never be the Mentee's direct administrative supervisor.
Session Length	60 minutes (up to 90 minutes if required), with 10 minutes of preparation by each party before the session.
Meeting Frequency	A monthly meeting is the minimum acceptable frequency. Additional meetings may be scheduled at the request of either the RPM or Mentee.
Program Duration	For each Mentee a minimum 24 months with the option to continue up to 36 months.
Confidentiality	The RPM will hold any session notes on a confidential basis and these notes, and any discussions will not be shared with any administrative supervisors or used in any performance evaluations, subject to limits that will be discussed below.
Outcome Tracking	Self-reported wellbeing surveys at 6, 12, 24 and 36 months; voluntary turnover monitoring.

On Frequency: Why Monthly instead of Weekly

Research and practitioner consultation in the reflective practice literature suggests that weekly sessions, while attractive, can become unsustainable for both parties and may push conversations toward problem solving instead of reflection when there is not enough time between sessions for new experiences to accumulate. Monthly sessions (or even bi-weekly sessions when required) of 60–90 minutes allow space for experience, processing, and growth between meetings while preserving consistency. Monthly sessions are considered the minimum: sessions further apart than 4 weeks are insufficient to maintain the developmental relationship.

A Note on Confidentiality

Limits of Confidentiality

Mentees need to know, before the program begins, what the limits of confidentiality are. Reflective Practice Mentorship is not fully confidential if there is a disclosure of harm to the Mentee, a client, or a third party. The RPM is not a therapist and does not hold clinical confidentiality. However, the sessions content, discussions and notes should not be shared with administrative supervisors or used in performance evaluations. If this boundary is addressed at the very beginning, then both the RPM and the Mentee will be protected.

The Pairing Rule

The decision to permit cross-team and same-team pairing while strictly excluding the Mentee's direct administrative supervisor is a deliberate design choice:

- Cross-team pairing is a legitimate tool to build the Trellis culture, to expose the pair to different experiences, and to bring new context into reflective conversations.
- Same-team pairing allows the RPM to bring lived understanding of the specific caseload context which may deepen the relevance of reflective conversations.
- Excluding the direct administrative supervisor is non-negotiable: a RPM who also evaluates the Mentee's performance cannot offer the psychological safety and trusting relationship reflective mentorship requires and is built upon.

Research on supervisor support and organizational culture in early career social work confirms that the quality of the relational support is critical for retention, and that relationships emphasizing knowledge and skill development alongside emotional

support are more protective and productive than those focused on enforcement and compliance. [1, 10, 11]

Identifying and Preparing the RPMs

RPMs should be experienced workers, ideally five or more years of professional practice (but a minimum of three may be acceptable depending on the RPM candidate), who demonstrate strong relational capacity, self-awareness, and an orientation toward developmental work.

Selection criteria for RPMs:

- Strong relational skills and capacity for non-judgmental listening.
- Sufficient experience with the emotional terrain of social service practice.
- Willingness to maintain confidentiality and hold a non-evaluative stance.
- Ability to commit to the meeting frequency for the duration of the pairing.
- No direct administrative supervisory relationship with the proposed Mentee.
- RPM's may, however, be an administrative supervisor to a non-Mentee, preferably but not necessarily on a different team than the Mentee.

RPMs should receive a half-day orientation before the Program begins. Research with social work supervisors finds that effective relational support is a learnable skill set, drawing on proactive assessment of stress, creation of safe spaces for difficult conversations, attentiveness to signs of burnout, and the building of supportive relationships through unconditional positive regard. [10]

Matching Process

Matching is intentional, not random. The Program Coordinator should consider:

- Pairing rule compliance: proposed RPM must not be the Mentee's direct administrative supervisor.
- Program area relevance: same-team brings familiarity; cross-team brings broader perspective.
- Personality and communication style.
- Demographic considerations when a Mentee requests same gender or same cultural background Mentors.
- Scheduling compatibility.

Proposed pairs should have an opportunity to meet on an informal basis before committing. At any time, If either party feels the match no longer works, a rematch process should be made available without stigma.

Section 3: Session Structure Guide

This section provides RPMs with a structured approach to mentorship sessions. The proposed structure is not a script. Instead, it provides a reliable rhythm that the RPM may use and adapt to create safety, depth, and forward momentum within the sessions and the relationship. The Program's structure adapts two methodological foundations: the Positivity Principle and the Appreciative Inquiry cycle.

Foundation: The Positivity Principle

Reflective conversations that focus only on difficulty, deficits, or what is going wrong tend to exhaust and drain both parties over time. Academic research suggests that sessions should be grounded in the Positivity Principle where attention is also devoted to reflecting on what is going well, what strengths the Mentee is building, and what is possible. These positive reflections are parallel to and do not replace attention or focus on what is hard. [12]

This does not mean avoiding difficulty. Difficulty, building capacity and strengthening resilience is the very reason this Program exists. But there should be a deliberate balance in the conversations so that the Mentee is able to leave a session with a sense of their own capacity and direction, not just an exhaustive map of what is wrong or what is not working.

The RPM's Role in the Positivity Principle

Make space for what is working, what the Mentee is doing well, what they are learning, and what they want to build toward. Use the same intentionality for the positive as you bring to making space for what is difficult. A Mentee who only talks about difficulty will burn out. The research suggests that allowing a Mentee to reflect on even small growth will continue to build the inner resources needed to deal with difficulty and to sustain their work.

Foundation: Adapting the Appreciative Inquiry Cycle

This Program also adopts a modified version of the four-phase Appreciative Inquiry cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) originally developed to initiate and support organizational change but has recently been applied to reflective supervision in UK social work practice. [13]

In the UK adaptation, the Appreciative Inquiry cycle is used in **supervision** sessions to work through case decisions: Discovery describes the case, Dream imagines the ideal outcome, Design develops a practical plan, Destiny implements it. That model

is appropriate for managerial supervision where the supervisor has authority over case decisions. [12]

The four phases are used as a framework within this Program. Each phase is reframed entirely around the Mentee's own development instead of case decisions. Case decisions will remain within the jurisdiction of administrative supervision. The RPM will not decide what the Mentee should do in a case. The RPM helps the Mentee: Discover what they are noticing, Dream about who they want to become as a practitioner, Design how they might grow, and carry this forward as their preferred Destiny.

The Core Reframing

In supervision, the cycle answers: 'What should we do about this case?' In Reflective Practice Mentorship, the cycle answers: 'What is this work doing in me, and who am I becoming through it?' The structural separation between the RPM and the administrative supervisor is what permits and allows this reframing to happen. The RPM does not carry case authority, and this frees the RPM to attend to the inner life of the early career social worker.

The Session Structures Will Evolve and Adapt Over Time

It is worth repeating that the structure of the sessions is not meant to be a rigid script. The proposed structure will, however, help guide the Mentee's initial reflections on their practice, what they are learning, what they can build upon, and what may need to change. As the RPM and Mentee develop their own relationship and as the Mentee builds capacity and resilience, the structure of the sessions may begin to look quite different. What should not change is the incorporation of the Positivity Principle and the ongoing exploration of the difficult and the positive. As the Mentee matures in their practice, the RPM might not focus as much on the Appreciative Inquiry cycle and its four phases. This is simply an evolution of the Program. However, it may still be worthwhile to explore the four phases with the Mentee from time to time.

Before the Session: Brief Preparation

Both the RPM and the Mentee should spend ten minutes preparing for the session. The preparation is not meant to be onerous. The RPM and Mentee have busy schedules and run the risk of simply moving from one meeting straight into a reflective session. The ten minutes of preparation time is a deliberate pause and reset in your schedule before the conversation begins.

Mentee preparation might include noticing what has been sitting with them since the last session, identifying one or two experiences from the past two weeks they want to explore, reflecting on any commitments made in the last session, whether they were acted on, and what the outcomes may have been.

RPM preparation might include reviewing any notes from the prior session; reflecting on themes that have been emerging; considering what kind of presence the Mentee might need today.

1. Discovery

15–20 minutes: What's happening, both the good and not so good?

Discovery is the opening of the session. Its purpose is to understand what the Mentee has experienced since the last session with attention on both what is working and what is hard. This is where the Positivity Principle is most active. The RPM should ask about growth and difficulty in parallel instead of approaching these as a sequence. It is in this phase where the RPM may be able to identify strong emotions, both positive and negative, that are emerging or developing. It is also this phase where the RPM needs to focus on the Mentee's wellbeing and whether there are any positive or negative changes in the Mentee's wellbeing since the previous meeting.

In Discovery, the RPM is actively listening, slowing the Mentee down, and helping the Mentee see what is present in their experience right now. Some sessions may require more prompts and nudges than other sessions.

Discovery Questions

- "How are you doing, for real? And not just good or fine but how are you feeling sitting here, right now?"
- "What's been on your mind since we last talked? Is there anything you've been trying to wrap your head around?"
- "Tell me something that went well in the last couple of weeks? Doesn't have to be anything big, every small win adds up."
- "What's been the hardest? What's been weighing on you?"
- "Is there a specific case that has impacted you in a positive way? In a negative way?"
- "Where do you feel like you're growing right now? Where are you feeling stuck?"

- “Are there any specific conversations, a specific case, or something that happened that you want to explore?”
- “Have you experienced any emotions that may have impacted how you make decisions?”

What the RPM Is Doing

- Listening without an agenda.
- Making space for both what is working and what is hard.
- Resisting the urge to move toward action prematurely
- Reflecting back what they hear so the Mentee can hear it more clearly.
- Noticing what is unsaid as well as what is said.
- Feeling emotional changes.
- Identifying any changes in the Mentee’s wellbeing.

2. Dream

15–20 minutes: What do you want to be?

Dream is the imaginative phase. Its purpose is to help the Mentee picture what good practice would look like for them, how might they make better decisions, how might they make more impactful connections, how might they rephrase difficult conversations, or how might they improve their wellbeing. While current or past cases are used as examples and ground the conversation, this phase is not about ideal case outcomes, but about who the Mentee wants to become as a practitioner. Remember, assessing what an ideal case outcome may look like is part of the administrative supervision process.

Dream may be the phase where a Mentee is surprised by their thoughts and ideas. Early career social workers may spend much of their time reacting to their work with little time left over to imagine who they want to become professionally. The RPM’s role is to create a space for the Mentee’s imagination.

Dream Questions

- “Imagine how you would handle this case as your vision of an ideal social worker? What would you do differently? Is it the outcome that would change or how you deal with the outcome?”

- “What would ‘good practice’ or a ‘good outcome’ look like in your example?”
- “Have you worked with someone or watched someone manage this kind of problem in a way that resonates for you? Is there something you would borrow or try out?”
- “Have you encountered a similar problem that you think you handled well? What did you do that worked for you?”
- “Imagine yourself one year from now. What do you hope is different about how you’d manage this?”
- “If you had a chance to redo a conversation with the family, a colleague, or even yourself, how would you like the conversation to be different?”

What the RPM Is Doing

- Inviting expansive idealism instead of realism.
- Drawing on the Mentee’s past competence to demonstrate the possible.
- Listening for values to guide the next phase.
- Resisting the urge to inject their own vision because the Dream belongs to the Mentee.

3. Design

15–20 minutes: What could you try right now?

Design is the pragmatic phase. Its purpose is to help the Mentee move from the imaginative Dream toward something they can try within their real constraints, their actual capacity, the support available to them, and the work they are already doing. Its goal is to allow the Mentee to understand how they may work within constraints to still make a difference for the families they work with and for the Mentee.

Design is not about the RPM telling the Mentee what to do. It is about the RPM providing guidance to the Mentee as they identify with what they can realistically experiment. When required, the RPM will guide the Mentee in identifying any needed supports for their wellbeing that should be accessed. The RPM’s questions are meant to help the Mentee discover their own options and understand what supports they might need.

Design Questions

- “From what you just imagined in the Dream phase, what do you feel is doable right now?”
- “What’s one small thing you could try as a first step towards change? Where would you start?”
- “What do you need to have in place for you to try this?”
- “What kind of supports would help you right now? From me, your supervisor, your colleagues and even yourself?”
- “What might get in the way? What is in your control and what is outside your control?”
- “What do you want to keep learning to continue to grow and thrive as a social worker?”
- “Would it help to do a deeper dive into something specific.”

What the RPM Is Doing

- Helping the Mentee change the focus from many possibilities to one or two realistic experiments.
- Asking what support is needed, including support from the RPM.
- Identifying organizational or systemic constraints honestly without using them to dismiss possible outcomes.
- Resisting the urge to prescribe a design which needs to be discovered by the Mentee.

A Note on Unmet Need

Sometimes the Design phase will reveal that what the Mentee needs to grow is not within the power of the Mentee, the RPM, or the organization to provide because there is a structural or organizational resource that is missing. Being honest about this has significant value. If it is appropriate, the RPM may encourage the Mentee to explore any unmet needs or deficits with their administrative supervisor or other appropriate individual. Except in special circumstances the RPM does not become an advocate for the Mentee. Instead, the RPM helps the Mentee identify when they may need to advocate for themselves.

4. Destiny

10–15 minutes: What will you carry forward?

Destiny synthesizes what has been discovered in the first three phases. The objective is to bring the Mentee back to their present state, identify what they discovered in the session, what they are going to take from this session, and what they are going to work on or implement in a specific case or their daily practice between now and the next meeting.

This is not a goal setting exercise, and it may not even be about creating a plan of action. That is the jurisdiction of the administrative supervisor. Instead, the focus is on helping the Mentee ask themselves how their thinking shifted and have they thought of something new they can try. Help the Mentee think in terms of what they want to hold onto from the session, what is their new possible, and what might they do to make the possible their new reality? In other words, it is about the Mentee committing to try something new, experimenting with a new approach, or finding a way to change a mindset.

Destiny Questions

- “What are one or two ideas that have you thinking or intrigued right now?”
- “Is there anything that you would like to try out before our next meeting? This can be an experiment, and it doesn’t have to be big.”
- “How are feeling now compared to when we sat down? Has anything shifted in your mindset, or emotionally?”
- “Is there anything specific from today that you want to hold onto, think about and further reflect on?”
- “What do you need between now and our next meeting, from yourself or from anyone else?”
- “When should we meet again?”

What the RPM Is Doing

- Helping the Mentee process what was talked about.
- Making the conversation’s value visible by identifying specific shifts in thinking.
- Setting goals is not essential but a commitment to try something new or different is important.
- Identifying any supports that may be needed before the next session.

- Setting the next meeting, especially if you or the Mentee feel an accelerated meeting would be helpful.
- End on a positive note to reinforce the relationship.

Section 4: Guiding Question Bank

The Discovery/Dream/Design/Destiny structure in Section 3 provides the shape of a session, especially when a Mentee is new to the Program. This section provides a deeper inventory of questions, organized by possible emotional terrains that an early career social worker may experience in their practice. RPMs can draw on these questions during any phase of the session, based on the cues that the RPM receives from the Mentee.

Keeping in mind the Positivity Principle, the prompts focus on exploring the difficult experiences as well as drawing out what is working well. Providing the Mentee the opportunity to explore the good along with the difficult may help the Mentee develop a better understanding of their emotions, their strengths, and what may need to be strengthened.

Note, the RPM can use these prompts even if they are running a session that is not using or focused on the Appreciative Inquiry cycle.

1. When you don't know what to do.

For when the Mentee feels unprepared or unsure of the right call.

When it's hard:

- "If you are feeling stuck or unsure, why do you think you feel this way? Is it because you are still learning new skills or do you feel that you can't handle this problem?"
- "Do you believe that there is a difference between being uncertain versus being incapable? Do you know whether you can tell the difference between the two?"
- "If you feeling unsure, stuck, or lost do these feelings ever affect you physically? What is it that you feel?"
- "Nobody is perfect so what do you think 'good enough' would look like in this case?"

When it's working:

- "Can you think of an example where not knowing something ended up leading you to a positive result?"

- "Do you know anyone here, or in any other part of your life that appears to deal with uncertainty well? What do they do that you notice?"
- Can you turn your uncertainty into a learning experience?"

2. When you carry the work with you.

For when the Mentee's difficult cases are following them home.

When it's hard:

- "What are the specific cases or families that you continue to think about when you leave at the end of the day? Is there anything in common with these cases or families?"
- "Do you think you can recognize when you take on or absorb a client's problems as your own problem? What do you think the signals might be?"
- "Are you carrying something right now that you haven't had a chance to put down?"

When it's working:

- "When you do manage to leave your work at work, are you doing anything specific to set aside your work? What does this look like? What stops you from doing this at the end of each day?"
- "Have you had a stretch lately where your work time and your you time feel balanced? What were you doing or feeling when you felt in balance?"

3. When power dynamics with families feel uncomfortable.

For when the Mentee is trying to navigate any authority over families or individuals.

When it's hard:

- "When does having power in this relationship feel uncomfortable to you? What is the discomfort trying to tell you?"
- "Has there been a moment recently where the power dynamic shifted in a way you didn't expect? What happened?"
- "How do you balance the authority that comes with your role and who you are? What makes this difficult?"

When it's working:

- "Can you think of an example or a time when you felt that you successfully balanced your authority and who you are? How did you do that and what did it feel like?"
- "On a good day, how do you think a family might experience your role? What do you think they may see in your role and in you?"

4. When cases hit close to home.

For Mentees who feel a specific case or family is triggering something personal to them.

When it's hard:

- "Is there a case right now that's affecting you more than others? Why do you think this case is doing that to you?"
- "Have you caught yourself reacting more strongly than usual to a particular client?"
- "Are there client stories that remind you of something from your own life? How are you handling that?"

When it's working:

- "Is there an experience or experiences from your own life that you believe actually helped you connect with a client in a positive way?"
- "Is there someone you go to or talk to when work touches or triggers something personal to you? What is it about this person or what you talk about that you find helpful?"

5. Setting boundaries without withdrawing or shutting down.

For Mentees struggling with setting limits without becoming detached.

When it's hard:

- "Have you caught yourself pulling back emotionally from someone recently? Why do you think this happened?"
- "Do you see a difference between wanting to protect yourself shutting down? Can you tell which one you are doing?"
- "What happens when you're too open with a client? What happens when you're too closed?"

When it's working:

- "From your own experience, not the textbooks, what does a healthy boundary actually feel like?"
- "Is there an example of a time when you were able to successfully stay present in a difficult or hard case without feeling consumed or swallowed by it? What do you feel helped you successfully navigate that situation?"

6. When your values and your job are not aligned.

For Mentees who experience a gap between what they believe is right and what the system or organization allows.

When it's hard:

- "Have there been moments lately where what you thought was right and what this job requires pulls you in different directions? How did you react, what did you do?"
- "When the system can't give a family what you believe they actually need, how do you handle that?"
- "If the organization could hear one thing about what early career social workers are actually going through, what would that be?"

When it's working:

- "Has there been a recent moment where your values and your work were in sync? What was that situation?"
- "What drew you to this career in the first place? Can you still see those reasons in what you are doing day to day?"

7. Finding meaning when progress is slow.

For Mentees who struggle to stay motivated when outcomes are slow, invisible, or not what you hoped for.

When it's hard:

- "What do you hold onto when a case doesn't go the way you wanted it to?"
- "How do you tell the difference between actually failing and something just being hard?"
- "What would it take to still be doing this work in five years? What needs to be true?"

When it's working:

- "Can you think of a moment since our last meeting where you felt like you made a difference, even a small difference? How did that make you feel?"
- "What does progress actually look like in this work? Has your sense of "what counts" or "what matters most" changed since you started your career?"

Section 5: Warning Signs Guide

One of the most crucial functions of a RPM is to notice, and make the Mentee aware, when a Mentee may be approaching a negative threshold, that they cannot see themselves. Compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and early burnout develop gradually and are frequently invisible to the person experiencing them.

Research with social work supervisors and mentors identifies the proactive noticing of stress and burnout signals as a core function of effective relational support. But when the administrative supervisor's focus is on monitoring performance, reviewing caseloads and outcomes, and goal setting, the administrative supervisor may not have the capacity to also focus on potential warning signals. This is the role of the RPM, where a trusting relationship is being built and their attentive presence may help them identify warning signs much sooner than others may be able to do so. [8]

Understanding What the RPM May be Seeing

Term	What It Is	What It Sounds Like
Compassion Fatigue	Emotional exhaustion arising from sustained exposure to others' trauma. Gradual onset.	"I feel numb to it." "I don't feel as much as I used to."
Secondary Traumatic Stress	Acute stress symptoms arising from indirect exposure to traumatic events experienced by clients.	"I can't stop thinking about what that child described." "I had nightmares about a case."
Moral Injury	Distress arising from acting against one's values, or being unable to prevent harm, due to systemic constraints.	"I know what that family needs and I can't give it to them."
Early Burnout	Chronic exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy from prolonged occupational stress.	"I don't care anymore." "I'm just going through the motions."

See: [8, 10, 14]

What to Watch for in Sessions

- Increasing cynicism about clients, families, or the organization.
- Consistent difficulty finding anything positive or meaningful in the work.
- Physical descriptions of depletion including persistent fatigue, sleep issues, appetite changes.
- Withdrawal from colleagues, social activities, or social supports.
- Hyper-vigilance about cases.
- Unusual lack of emotion about cases.
- References to feeling trapped, or boxed in.
- Increasing dread about coming into work or meeting with families.
- Difficulty being present during mentorship sessions.
- Statements that minimize the Mentee's own needs: "I'm fine. This is just the way it is. Others have it worse."

How to Raise Concern

Language for Identifying Concern

For an RPM who may need suggestions on how to raise concerns with the Mentee, consider a variation of the following:

"I've noticed over the last few weeks that you seem [more tired / less connected / harder on yourself than usual]. I don't want to assume anything, but I wanted to let you know what I'm observing, check in with you directly, and let you know that this is a safe place for us to talk about this. So how are you, really?"

When to Escalate

Circumstances in which a RPM should encourage a Mentee to access formal support beyond the mentorship relationship:

- Any disclosure of suicidal ideation or self-harm.
- Indications that the Mentee's distress is affecting client safety.
- Sustained secondary traumatic stress symptoms that do not resolve over two sessions.
- Requests from the Mentee for referral to more formal support.

Encourage the Mentee to access the organizations existing supports, which are applicable. In some cases, you may have to encourage the Mentee to seek assistance from a third party clinical resource.

What is critical, is that the RPM must frame the seeking of help or support as a sign of professional strength and wisdom. Understanding when help is required is part of the capacity and resilience building journey. Seeking help or support should never be framed as professional weakness.

A Note for Mentors on Their Own Wellbeing

The work of guiding another person through distress or trauma or creating a safe place to explore distress or trauma, is also demanding on the RPM. RPMs should have their own support structures and feel empowered to raise concerns about the Program or their own sustainability within the Program. The RPMs are meant to also benefit reciprocally from the Program. The RPM should not feel depleted over the course of the Program.

Section 6: Three Year Outcome Tracking Framework

This Program is designed to generate evidence about whether structured Reflective Practice Mentorship reduces early burnout and improves retention.

Quantitative Indicators

Indicator	Data Source	Collection Point
Voluntary turnover rate (enrolled cohort vs. historical baseline)	HR records	12, 24, 36 months
Self-reported occupational wellbeing (validated scale)	Mentee survey	Baseline, 6, 12, 24, 36 months
Self-reported professional competence	Mentee survey	Baseline, 6, 12, 24, 36 months
Session completion rate	RPM reporting	Quarterly
RPM satisfaction with the Program	RPM survey	12 and 24 months

Suggested Wellbeing Survey

One possible validated, instrument suitable for this population is the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL), which measures compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. It is freely available, takes approximately ten minutes to complete, and has strong normative data for social service populations. [9] Trellis may have their own survey or a different survey. The key is to collect and track the data.

A Note on Comparison

For the strongest possible evidence, Trellis should track outcomes for early career social workers who are currently one to three years into their careers, or who would have been one to three years into their careers but are no longer with Trellis, as a historical comparison group, allowing assessment of whether outcomes for early career social workers who enter the Program is changed, and how.

References and End Notes

Evidence-based claims in this document are marked as end notes. For a summary of the source and its relevance to this problem please refer to the Research Dossier prepared for Trellis.

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