

BURNOUT AMONG THE COUNSELING PROFESSION: A SURVEY OF FUTURE PROFESSIONAL COUNSELORS

By

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ABSTRACT

Research studies indicate that, the rate of burnout among professional counselors is a continued concern. The nature of the work that counselors do make them susceptible to stress and poor self-care leading to possible burnout. Counselors and counselors in training need to develop awareness about the possibility of burnout when entering the world of professional counseling. Developing a self-care awareness component in counseling programs is advocated by the American Counseling Association as part of counselor training to help prepare future counselors against burnout that leads to counseling impairment. The aim of this study was to examine a group of counseling student participants to obtain measurable data regarding the presence of indicators of burnout. The purpose of the study was to determine the presence of burnout among this student population. This research was conducted using a two-part survey that included demographic data, and a burnout assessment tool, based on the Freudenberger Burnout Scale, (2007), which examined what they were presently experiencing that could lead to burnout. Over 85% of the participants in this study have some degree of indication that burnout is either something they should be aware of and paying attention to, or they are overtly demonstrating indication that they are burned out, with a situation that may be threatening to their physical and mental well-being.

Keywords: Burnout, Extinction of Motivation, Professional Counselors, Counseling Students.

INTRODUCTION

What is this phenomenon called "burnout?" According to Baldwin, Barmore, Suprina, & Weaver (2011) burnout is a job stress phenomenon and is also a form of mental distress that may be accompanied by physical health issues. The mental distress that accompanies burnout may include persistent exhaustion, both physical and psychological. The person experiencing burnout may also find that negative attitude abound in his or her daily life. Joy in the simple things is no longer experienced. Headaches, muscle tension or sleep disturbances that might have occurred occasionally in a person's life become a chronic occurrence for someone who is experiencing burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). The term "burnout" was coined by Dr. Herbert Freudenberger, a psychologist who first used it in a publication in 1974, "Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement." It was defined as "the extinction of motivation or incentive,

especially where one's devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results" (Freudenberger, 1999).

Burnout has also been described as a feeling of emotional and physical exhaustion that is intertwined with an intense sense of failure and frustration (Wolfe, 1981). Burnout does not happen overnight, but rather, begins to manifest itself when work stresses and other lifestyle habits are not handled appropriately by the person who eventually experiences burned out. The problem with burnout is that as it is happening most people are unaware that the process of burnout is occurring in their lives.

Once burnout has occurred, the potential for disruption in a person's life in the area of physical, psychological, and emotional health increases in a negative direction (Morse, Salyers, Rollins, Monroe-DeVita, & Pfahler, 2012). Maslach and colleagues (Maslach 1993; Maslach et al.

1996) developed a multifaceted definition that looks at three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is defined as feeling depleted, overextended, or fatigued. Depersonalization or cynicism is referred to as negative or cynical attitudes that focus on work in general with negative self-efficacy when applied to accomplishment abilities in the area of work (Stalker & Harvey, 2002).

Counselors who are on the road to burnout begin to exhibit behavior that includes cynicism, an inflexibility within themselves and with others, and distancing from clients which, in essence, affects the counselor/client relationship (Farber, 1990). All of these exhibited behaviors will likely increase the possibility of the counseling professional having higher rates of absenteeism or lower performance rate, eventually leading to the decision to leave the counseling profession (Raquepaw & Miller, 1989).

It behooves the mental health field to pay attention and work diligently with professional counselors and encourage their health and well-being (Morse, Salyers, Rollins, Monroe-DeVita, & Pfahler, 2012). The counseling profession needs to continue to engage in research about burnout among counselors and build a more robust knowledge base in regards to the prevalence, causes, and effects of burnout in the field of counseling (Paris & Hoge, 2010).

Review of the Literature

A national survey conducted by Lawson (2007) on counselor wellness and impairment indicated that, counselors who are experiencing stress or burnout are not able to offer the highest level of counseling services to clients, and are likely to experience a loss of quality of life in several domains. These domains include the area of physical, social, emotional, and spiritual wellness.

Weiss (2004) states that, persons who are experiencing burnout may not be aware of this phenomenon that is occurring, and may think that they are experiencing depression since burnout and depression are so similar in symptoms. No one is immune from burnout, and it seems

that counselors, because of the nature of the work that they do may find themselves in a vulnerable position to develop burnout. Maslach (2003) has identified several causes that have been known to lead to burnout. These include work overload, lack of control, unsupportive work peers, and punitive supervisors. All of these issues can lead to an increase in the risk of or hastening burnout for the counselor.

Qualities that make a counselor effective such as empathy, compassion and caring are qualities that may also make them vulnerable to compassion fatigue, stress and burnout (Thompson, Amatea, & Thompson, 2014). Issues that can strain a counselor's physical and psychological resources such as managed care protocols, large caseloads, and lack of funding for mental health programs have an impact on a counselor's ability to maintain a healthy equilibrium while facing these concerns (Lee, Cho, Kissinger, & Ogle, 2010).

A study conducted at a counseling organization conference indicated three areas that tend to contribute to counselor burnout: job satisfaction, level of self-esteem, and locus of control. According to Lee, Cho, Kissinger, & Ogle (2010), seven areas of job satisfaction were identified and used in their study using a Likert scale. The findings indicated that, groups of counselors that reported a higher level of income also reported a higher level of job satisfaction. The study also indicated that, higher levels of self-esteem and an internal locus of control were positive indicators of counselors having a lesser degree of burning out.

Self-efficacy and its relationship to burnout were studied in relationship to school counselors. Gunduz's (2012) study indicated that, self-efficacy predicted depersonalization and personal accomplishment dimensions of burnout in counselors. The school counselor that had a good social support and positive attitude toward school counseling as a profession had a lower rate of burnout and higher rate of self-efficacy belief.

Not only are professional counselors are at risk for burnout, counselors in training need to be aware of their own risk for burnout. A study conducted by Hughes & Kleist (2005) with counselor education doctoral level students indicated

that, personal pressures such as stress and isolation plus the rigors of an academic program can contribute to burnout. Discussed in the study was the need for counselor education programs to prepare quality graduate students. It is these students who will be advancing the counseling profession, both at the master's and doctoral level. One of the areas of preparedness for emerging counselors needs to be on wellness behavior by discussing the variables that can lead to burnout for the emerging counseling professional.

Current and future professional counselors face many challenges because of the nature of the work and the role expectations of the counseling professional (Yu, Lee, & Nesbit, 2008). Professional counselors find themselves working in different settings such as nonprofit agencies with limited funding or mandated short-term counseling (Osborn, 2004). These settings can create mental and emotional challenges for the counselor as they strive to accommodate the number of mental health clients with a range of diagnoses seeking help (Evans & Villavisanis, 1997).

In a quantitative study conducted by Miller, Iverson, Kimmelmeier, MacLane, Pistorello, Fruzzetti, Watkins, Pruitt, Oser, Katrichak, Erikson, & Crenshaw (2011) six counselors in training that utilized dialectical behavior therapy were compared with a control group of counselors in training that did not utilize DBT therapy with their clients. The counselors were followed for a year to evaluate their level of burnout after working with suicidal clients with borderline traits. The study used the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) which consisted of three subscales: emotional exhaustion which is defined as being emotionally extended and exhausted at work; depersonalization which is defined as unfeeling and impersonal response toward clients; and personal accomplishment which is defined as feelings of competence and successful achievement at work. Although the study did indicate a slighter lower level of stress and burnout possibility for the counselors in training utilizing DBT therapy with their clients, the need to be concerned with burnout for counselors in training was not alleviated (Miller, Iverson, et al, 2011).

Objective

This objective of this survey research was to obtain data to determine if Master's level counseling students demonstrated the possible indicators of burnout. In addition to the demographic data, the survey obtained data through the use of a burnout assessment, based on the Freudenberg Burnout Scale, (2007) (Appendix). The study was intended to examine the presence of burnout indicators among the participants in the study, and to provide information for counselor educators, as well as other educators and administrators about the level of well-being, or potential for burnout among a student population.

Research Question

Do the Master's level counseling students, participating in this study, demonstrate indicators of burnout?

Research Hypothesis

H₀ : There will be no indicators of burnout among master's - level counseling students, participating in this study.

Methodology

A non-experimental design was used in this investigation to obtain quantitative data. A single survey instrument was distributed through electronic mail, utilizing the online computerized program, SurveyMonkey.com. Permission to conduct this research was obtained from the Institutional Review Boards of two separate South Texas campuses of a large, Texas University system, where the surveys were to be conducted.

The survey was a two-part instrument. The first part consisted of questions to obtain demographic information, such as gender, age, employment status, part-time or full-time graduate student, marital status, any children, and belief regarding a good support system. The second half of the survey consisted of a burnout assessment, "Are You Burning Out?" adapted from "The Freudenberger Burnout Scale (2007)" (Appendix). This assessment contained questions that queried, "do you tire easily, are people saying you don't look so good lately, are you cynical or disenchanted, do you feel invaded by sadness, are you forgetting things, suffering from physical complaints, unable to laugh at yourself, sex feels like more

trouble than it's worth, and you have very little to say to people". A score of 0-25 = you're fine, 26-35 = there are things you should be watching, 36-50 = you're a candidate for burnout, 51-65= you sound burned out; a situation that may be threatening to your physical and mental well-being. The surveys were distributed to the students enrolled in the masters-level counseling programs of each of the South Texas Universities. Descriptive quantitative analysis was performed by the SurveyMonkey.com program to obtain frequencies and percentages for the demographic data. Individual scores were obtained for the Freudenberger Burnout Scale to determine the potential for burnout for each student.

Population

The research population consisted of graduate students enrolled in the Masters level counseling programs, in a Texas University system. A total of ninety-four (n=94) students agreed to participate and 35 returned usable surveys. Of those who participated in the survey, 58% were between the ages of 18 to 35 (n=35), 38% were between the ages of 36-50, and 6% were over 50 years of age. Eighty-four percent of the participants were female, and 16% were male. Eighty-six percent were working and going to school at the same time, while 14% were not employed. Sixty-two percent are full time graduate students, and 38% are part time graduate students. Forty-five percent are married and 55% are single. Fifty-five percent have children, and 45% do not. While 85.94% believe they have a good support system, 14.06% do not. (Table 1 shows the Demographic Information)

Results

Only 14.28% of the respondents scored between 0-25 on the burnout assessment, indicating that they were fine, 25.75% scored between 26-35, indicating that there were things they should be watching, 14.28% scored between 36-50 indicating that they were a candidate for burnout, 22.85% scored between 51-65, indicating they were burning out, and 22.85% scored over 65, indicating that they sounded burned out; a situation that may be threatening to their physical and mental well-being (Table 2).

| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|---------------------------------------|---------|------------------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 19.05% | 12 |
| | Female | 80.95% | 51 |
| Age | 18-35 | 50.79% | 32 |
| | 35-50 | 41.27% | 26 |
| | Over 50 | 7.94% | 5 |
| Employment status | Yes | 82.81% | 53 |
| | No | 17.19% | 11 |
| Enrollment status – full time | Yes | 67.19% | 43 |
| | No | 32.81% | 21 |
| Enrollment status—part time | Yes | 38.60% | 22 |
| | No | 61.40% | 35 |
| Married | Yes | 46.88% | 30 |
| | No | 53.15% | 34 |
| Children | Yes | 58.73% | 37 |
| | No | 41.27% | 26 |
| Believe to have a good support system | Yes | 85.94% | 55 |
| | No | 14.06% | 9 |

n=35

Table 1. Demographic Information

| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|---------|--|------------------|----------------|
| 0-25 | You're fine | 14.28% | 5 |
| 26-35 | There are things you should be watching | 25.7% | 9 |
| 36-50 | You're a candidate for burnout | 14.28% | 5 |
| 51-65 | You are burning out | 22.85% | 8 |
| Over 65 | You sound burned out; a situation that may be threatening to your physical and mental well-being | 22.85% | 8 |

n=35

Table 2. Are you Burning Out?

Discussion

These findings indicated that, 85.72% of the respondents in this study have some degree of indication that burnout is either something they should be aware of and paying attention to, or they are overtly demonstrating indication that they are burned out, with a situation that may be threatening to their physical and mental well-being. According to Weiss (2004), who stated that, persons who are experiencing burnout may not be aware of this phenomenon that is occurring, and may think that they are experiencing depression since burnout and depression are so similar in symptoms. These findings appear to be similar to the study conducted by Hughes & Kleist (2005) with counselor education doctoral level students, which indicated that personal pressures such as stress and isolation, plus the rigors of an academic program can contribute to burnout. Additionally, 85.94%

of the respondents indicated that, they had good support systems in their lives. The data did not support the research hypothesis, and the null hypothesis was rejected.

Conclusions and Recommendations

No one is immune from burnout (Weiss, 2004), and it appears that the data in this study have demonstrated just how vulnerable anyone can be, and especially in a student population. Counselor educators need to be current on wellness and self-care information, and perhaps include modules and courses in their curriculum. Wellness needs to be emphasized, not only from the client perspective, but also the wellness of the professional counselor, as well as the future professional counselor. Since the symptoms of burnout and depression can be so similar (Weiss, 2004), students need to be aware of signs and symptoms, and be taught the importance of addressing their own mental health needs, well-being, and self-care.

Programs may have counseling and wellness centers on campus that can provide great benefit to the students, as they can seek personal counseling to address their own issues. Wellness programs can include guided imagery, massage therapy, aroma therapy, music therapy, relaxation techniques, in addition to other services that can be beneficial, and students need to be encouraged to utilize these resources. No matter how far along one is, in the burnout process, it is reversible (Freudenberger, 2007). Future studies might focus on the level of burnout in other counseling programs, as well as throughout the academic setting. By being pro-active and making burnout a part of a curriculum, hopefully, it can be prevented, also.

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Appendix

Assessing Burnout Risk for the Counseling Student:

Are You Burning Out?

Have you noticed changes in yourself over the past 6 months?

Assign a number from 0 (for no or little change) to 5 (for a great deal of change) for each of the following questions. (This test is not meant to replace a clinical assessment.)

- _____ 1. Do you tire more easily? Feel fatigued rather than energetic?
- _____ 2. Are people annoying you by telling you, "you don't look so good lately"?
- _____ 3. Are you working harder and harder and accomplishing less and less?
- _____ 4. Are you increasingly cynical and disenchanted?
- _____ 5. Are you often invaded by a sadness you can't explain?
- _____ 6. Are you forgetting things (appointments, deadlines, personal possessions)?
- _____ 7. Are you increasingly irritable? More short tempered? More disappointed in the people around you?
- _____ 8. Are you seeing close friends and family members less frequently?
- _____ 9. Are you too busy to do even routine things like making phone calls or reading reports or Sending out Christmas or other cards?
- _____ 10. Are you suffering from physical complaints? (e.g.,

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- aches, pains, headaches, a lingering cold)
- ___ 11. Do you feel disoriented when the activity of the day comes to a halt?
- ___ 12. Is joy elusive?
- ___ 13. Are you unable to laugh at a joke about yourself?
- ___ 14. Does sex seem like more trouble than it's worth?
- ___ 15. Do you have very little to say to people?
- ___ TOTAL
- 0-25 → you are fine

- 26-35 → there are things you should be watching
- 36-50 → you are a candidate for burnout
- 51-65 → you are burning out
- Over 65 → You sound burned out; a situation that may be threatening to your physical and mental well-being
- Don't let a high total score alarm you, but pay attention to it. Burnout is reversible, no matter how far along it is.
- (Adapted from the Freudenberger Burnout Scale)

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