ADDRESSING BURNOUT AMONG HUMAN SERVICE WORKERS: A CURRICULUM

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Introduction

- Burnout has been recognized as a widespread phenomenon among those in human service work (Borritz et al., 2010, McCarter, 2007, Noben et al., 2014).


- The purpose of this curriculum is to provide human service workers with skills to prevent and treat burnout within themselves as well as aid managers who oversee human service workers recognize the signs of burnout within their employees and develop skills for intervention.
Social Work Relevance

- Social workers cited burnout as a common reason for various health problems and were sometimes leaving the workforce entirely (Arrington, 2008).
- Moreover, younger clinicians were found to be at greater risk of developing burnout when compared to their more seasoned colleagues (Craig & Sprang, 2010).
- This is an issue that is therefore directly affecting social work and in need of intervention.

As one social worker put it in NASW’s stress at work study, “The major challenge of social work is that social workers have too many things on their plates. They cannot possibly do everything they need to do and do it well. Burn out is the main reason people are leaving the profession. We are short-handed as it is....” (Arrington, 2008, p. 4).
Research has shown that there are socioeconomic factors and gender factors which may influence elements of burnout.

For example, in a study conducted by Acker (2010), sociodemographic variables were found to negatively influence depersonalization and perceived personal accomplishment.

Of the 460 social workers in the sample, those who identified as White were more likely to score higher on measures of depersonalization and lower on perceived confidence than other racial and ethnic participants.

Furthermore, the study found that those with higher levels of education reported more emotional exhaustion. Other studies have found that females are at a higher risk for developing burnout symptoms (Ballenger-Browning et al., 2011; Baum, 2015).
Methods

• This curriculum will be a 6 hour program comprised of four 1.5 hour sessions.
• The curriculum adapted for supervisors will have the same content except for an added 1.5 hour session, totaling 7.5 hours for supervisors.
• Designed for human service workers and should consist of five-10 participants. Research has shown that this is the optimum size for a group such as this one, which is psychoeducational in nature (Toseland & Rivas, 2012).
• The group should be closed so that participants may build on skills and knowledge gained in the previous session.
• The curriculum will be able to be used at an agency that has human service workers and an available quiet room large enough to accommodate the group.
• It should be facilitated by a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, psychologist, marriage and family therapist, or other professional trained in mindfulness and the supervision of human service workers.
• It is preferable that the facilitator not be affiliated with the agency to allow for confidentiality and increase participant’s comfort in discussing troublesome work aspects.
Curriculum

Session 1: Welcome, Introductions, and Agenda Overview
Objectives: Understand burnout and factors that may make burnout worse, recognize how burnout may be affecting them as individuals, understand the purpose of the workshop, training agreements, and confidentiality

Session 2: Decreasing Emotional Exhaustion
Objectives: Understand what emotional exhaustion is and ways it can manifest, identify strategies that can be utilized to prevent and treat emotional exhaustion, identify what mindfulness is and practice techniques

Session 3: Decreasing Depersonalization
Objectives: understand what depersonalization is and how it may be presenting itself in work life, learn strategies for increasing empathy, learn and develop a plan for reorganizing work tasks to reduce depersonalization/burnout
Curriculum

Session 4: Increasing Personal Accomplishment

Objectives: have opportunity to discuss personal accomplishments with other participants, understand and practice ways to increase sense of personal accomplishment, review curriculum lessons, definitions, and take-aways, review standing on mini Maslach inventory and complete survey

Session 5: Special Session for Managers

Objectives: gain awareness and increase sensitivity to burnout among front line staff members, understand what organizational factors they can manipulate to reduce likelihood that employees experience burnout symptoms, increase confidence to apply strategies with staff members who may be experiencing burnout symptoms
Evaluation

• Burnout symptoms will be measured pre and post curriculum utilizing the mini Maslach burnout inventory (Maslach, 1986)

• Reaction and learning will be measured by a pre and post test questionnaire

• Given limitations of this curriculum, prolonged measurement of burnout symptoms is not feasible, but managers are encouraged to continue to utilize inventory to document progress
Implications for Social Work

• This curriculum is extremely relevant to the field of social work, as they are one of the primary targets of the interventions set forth.

• The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2013) has called for action to retain employ more social workers at a time when the profession is struggling to maintain a stable workforce.

• This instability is due in large part to the burnout experienced by many in the profession.

• The NASW’s Code of Ethics six major principles; competence, dignity, integrity, the importance of relationships, service, and commitment to social justice and advocacy, are all in jeopardy when social workers experience burnout.
References

Acker, G. M. (2010). The challenges in providing services to clients with mental illness: Managed care, burnout and somatic symptoms among social workers. Community Mental Health Journal, 46(6), 591-600.


