Helping Mental Health Supervisors Prevent Staff Burnout: A Workshop Curriculum

Daniel Chatman
California State University, Long Beach
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Introduction

- Staff burnout is widely recognized as a problem in the delivery of social services and mental health in particular because it undermines the functioning of service providers (Morse, Salyers, Rollins, Monroe-DeVita, & Pfahler, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

- Burnout disrupts continuity of care, reduces access to care, and increases costs due to recruitment, orientation, and training of new staff (Paris & Hoge, 2010).

- Burnout undermines the implementation of evidence-based practices and arguably does harm to the persons receiving services (Woltmann et al., 2008).
Relevance to Social Work

When social workers experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of accomplishment, they may be less able to uphold the NASW’s Code of Ethics. Working with dignity means that mental health social workers receive the resources and support from supervisors to perform well, but without compromising their own physical and mental health. Working with integrity means being truthful and reliable, which can be directly compromised by high emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Personal relationships are a mainstay of social work, and can be directly affected when mental health workers experience high depersonalization, thus feeling alienated from the work and the people they support. Commitment to service and social justice cannot occur without maintaining one’s own health, since we cannot consistently help others thrive without maintaining our own wellness. The NASW (2008) Code of Ethics specifies that competent supervision is a key component for abiding by their code. Supervisors need the knowledge and skills to help workers uphold these tenets in order to serve their clients in a consistently ethical manner.
The need for burnout preventions and interventions for mental health providers has been identified since the 1970s, yet relatively few efforts have been made to reduce or prevent burnout in mental health agencies (Morse et al., 2012).

Of the interventions designed to address burnout, the majority have been individual-level interventions—that is, targeting front-line staff (Awa, Plaumann, & Walter, 2010).

Individual-level interventions have remained the primary focus of recent research, despite the fact that past research has suggested the use of mezzo-level changes to reduce burnout (Morse et al., 2012).

Given that organizational or environmental level variables tend to be more powerful predictors than individual factors, there is a need for interventions targeting organizational functioning as much as individual behavior (Morse et al., 2012).

In a study of New York State mental health service providers ($N = 460$), levels of workplace support and role stress have been shown to be predictive of emotional exhaustion and intent to quit (Acker, 2012). The results suggest that proper supervision can positively affect emotional exhaustion, role stress, and intent to quit.
Methods

- The purpose of this workshop curriculum is to provide a macro-level intervention to reduce burnout in mental health staff.
- The curriculum is intended to help supervisors improve their supportive and educative skills, which may help reduce burnout in their staff.
- The target group is supervisors who work at public, private and nonprofit mental health agencies.
- This curriculum is designed to be delivered as a 1-day, 6-hour workshop.
- All the materials needed to implement the curriculum are included in the Appendices. Appendix A, Trainer’s Guide, provides the instruction for implementing the workshop. Appendix B, Participant’s Folder, includes the handouts for the participants.
- A participant survey will be collected at the end of the workshop.
Curriculum Content

- **Part I** begins with introductions, a review of the agenda and training objectives, and participant agreements regarding how to best work together.

- **Part II** provides definitions of burnout and its historical context, including how burnout has occurred in other fields. Participants are invited to provide perspectives on burnout’s impact, including how supervisors, staff, agencies, and clients are affected by burnout.

- **Part III** focuses on workplace responses to burnout. Participants learn a set of prevention and intervention skills for burnout based on current research literature.

- **Part IV** includes a summary and closing remarks. The Trainer facilitates a discussion of what “next steps” participants can make to apply their skills in practice.
Discussion

- This curriculum is intended to address a generally unmet need in the mental health field. Relatively few organization-level interventions for burnout are published, despite the fact that researchers have underscored the need to comprehensively address burnout.
- The curriculum incorporates recent research in order to support evidence-based practice habits in the workplace.
- The development of burnout interventions in mental health is in its early stages, especially in terms of organization-level interventions.
- Given the relative lack of research in the field, the availability of relevant evidence-based practices is a concern.
References


