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Understanding stress and burnout in shelter workers.

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Abstract:	Crisis intervention workers and other front-line mental health workers often face excessive stress and seek psychotherapy or supervision and support from professional psychologists. The authors sought information on job-related stressors, coping mechanisms, and burnout levels and found that shelter workers who reported high job-related stress and low social support may be most vulnerable to experiencing burnout symptoms. Psychologists providing clinical or consultation services to domestic violence shelter staff should emphasize the importance of creating a supportive work environment, developing a sense of personal accomplishment related to one's work, and teaching and modeling helpful coping strategies. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2016 APA, all rights reserved)

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Understanding Stress and Burnout in Shelter Workers

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Burnout has become a major concern to professionals involved in crisis intervention work (Osofsky, 1996). The growing evidence of stress as a cause of human dysfunction has led to increased attention regarding the experience and management of stressful events among, for example, human service professionals employed in crisis settings (Fishbach & Tidwell, 1993–1994; McRaith & Brown, 1991; Thornton, 1992).

Stress, from a psychological perspective, has been defined as an unfavorable person–environment relationship (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which has been linked to negative psychological and physical health (Murphy & Schoenborn, 1987). Constant external stress can lead to internal burnout (Takooshian, 1994). Maslach (1976) posited that burnout is a particular kind of response to excessive job-related demands that results in the tendency to treat clients in detached and dehumanized ways. Maslach and Jackson (1982) defined burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion (being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work), depersonalization (having an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's service), and diminished personal accomplishment (having diminished feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people).

There is general agreement that burnout is a progressive syndrome that results directly from involvement in a helping relationship over an extended period of time (Arthur, 1990). Receiving the most attention as an approach to preventing burnout has been the development of strong social support systems (Ross, Altmaier, & Russell, 1989).

This project examined stress, burnout, and coping in shelter workers, a sample that has relevance for many psychologists. To be specific, shelter workers are employed in crisis intervention settings that often are used to train graduate students. Furthermore, psychologists refer clients to shelters for services, consult with shelter staff, and provide psychological treatment to shelter workers. In addition, results of this study may assist psychologists in understanding stress, burnout, and coping among crisis intervention workers.

Stress and Burnout in Shelter Workers

The present exploration was an analysis of the stressors inherent in shelter settings and the coping mechanisms, burnout levels, and motivation for employment exhibited by shelter workers. One hundred shelter workers employed in six Midwestern shelters were invited to participate in this study, and 91 chose to complete the survey packet (89 women, 1 man, 1 gender not indicated; 64 Caucasian, 20 African American, 1 Hispanic, 1 Native American, 1 Asian, 3 "other," and 1 ethnicity not provided). The participants' mean age was 32.80 years ($SD = 9.59$), and the number of months employed in shelters ranged from 0 to 144, with a mean of 29.62 ($SD = 28.43$). Participants completed a one-page demographic form that assessed ethnicity, gender, and months of employment and requested suggestions for how the shelter administration could assist the staff in working with battered women and their children.

We used the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) to assess three components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. We used the Perceived Social Support Scale (House & Wells, 1978) to measure the level of support received in work-related situations from four sources: supervisors, coworkers, partner or significant other, and friends and family. Sources of job-related stress were measured by the Job Stress Index (Smith & Sandman, 1988). We selected only 5 of the 11 subscales for this study because of their appropriateness for measuring job-related stress experienced by crisis workers: (a) Lack of Participation, (b) Lack of Achievement, (c) Red Tape, (d) Time Pressure, and (e) Physical Demands and Danger. The Shelter Stress Inventory is a modified version of the Job Stress Inventory (McRaith & Brown, 1991), and we used it to measure job-related stressful events that could be experienced by crisis workers assisting clients who have experienced domestic violence. An example of an item included on this scale was "Feeling frustrated when a battered woman returns to the home when I suspect the abuse will occur again." This measure also includes an "other" statement that allows

respondents to list a stressful event encountered in their work. We used the COPE ([Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989](#)) to measure emotion-focused and problem-focused coping styles and strategies. Whereas emotion-focused coping is directed at regulating emotional responses to stress, problem-focused coping is directed at managing or altering the stressful situation. Variables that motivated participants to seek employment at a shelter for battered women were assessed using the Motivation for Employment Scale, a 12-item instrument we developed that is based on previous work by [Black (1992)](#).

The results of our study indicated that shelter workers were moderately stressed, as evidenced by a mean score of 25.61 (*SD* = 8.95) on the Shelter Stress Inventory. Sixty-five percent of the sample experienced the following events and regarded them as moderately to highly stressful: "feeling frustrated when a battered woman returns to the home when future abuse is suspected," "dealing with anger at the perpetrators of domestic violence," and "dealing with the overwhelming pain and horror of domestic violence." Shelter workers also indicated that the most strongly endorsed reasons they sought employment at battered women's shelters were to assist people in need, to help stop battering and rape, and to contribute unique expertise to the program.

Thirty-six shelter workers provided 42 responses to an item requesting feedback for improving the shelter environment. A summary of these responses revealed a need to employ more staff. Several other workers indicated a need for less division between supervisors and other staff, with primary focus on improved communications. The need for increased pay was also reported by several workers as well as a need for clearer goals that would facilitate improved work efforts and outcomes.

Although shelter workers did not meet the criteria for burnout as specified by Maslach's classification, positive correlations between coping mechanisms and burnout components were revealed. Whereas scores on the Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization Scales were positively correlated with the coping strategy of Mental Disengagement, scores on the Personal Accomplishment Scale were associated with the following three coping subscales: Active Coping, Positive Reinterpretation and Growth, and Planning.

We used a canonical correlation analysis to investigate the relations between stress, social support, and burnout variables. Several of the job stress subscales and two sources of social support were significantly correlated with the burnout variables, Pillai's $V = .64$, $F(27, 234) = 2.34$, $p < .001$. The Time Pressure (job stress) subscale yielded the strongest positive correlation with the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization burnout components. Moderate positive correlations with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were found for the following job stress subscales: Red Tape, Physical Demands, Lack of Participation, and Lack of Achievement. In addition, perceived

social support from supervisor and perceived social support from friends and family were both negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Tables reporting more complete information on the results can be requested from Chris Brown.

Discussion: Implications and Applications

Implications for Supervising Shelter Workers

Psychologists who provide supervision to shelter workers should attend to the importance of providing support to these supervisees to reduce levels of burnout. This support may be critical in environments in which supervisees are exposed to unfamiliar or crisis situations. Assisting shelter workers in identifying other individuals whom they perceive to be both professionally and personally supportive of their work-related efforts also may be helpful in reducing stress and burnout. Training shelter supervisors to identify and implement the requisite skills and tasks needed to develop a supportive work environment should be emphasized.

Furthermore, psychologists might attend to the coping strategies used by shelter workers. Coping strategies that mentally remove oneself from the stressful situation are related to both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. In other words, shelter workers who cope with their work-related stress by mentally disengaging may experience a lack of energy and feel that their resources are used up. In addition, they may develop cynical and insensitive perceptions of their clients, coworkers, and organization. Mental disengagement occurs in a variety of activities that serve to distract the individual from thinking about the goal with which the stressor is interfering. Although disengaging from a goal is sometimes regarded as an adaptive response, it is also thought to impede adaptive coping.

On the other hand, a sense of personal accomplishment was related to the following healthy coping strategies: planning, positive reinterpretation and growth, and active coping. Shelter workers who exhibit feelings of job competence and successful achievement in their work or interactions with clients use both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies that allow them to (a) think about what steps to take and how to cope with the stressor, (b) manage their distress emotions without directly dealing with the stressor, and (c) take steps to remove the stressor or ameliorate its effects. Thus, psychologists might model and teach coping strategies that relate positively to personal accomplishment and negatively to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

Shelter workers involved in crisis work regard the work they provide as worthwhile and important. In addition, shelter workers who perceive high levels of support from friends and family are more likely to experience feelings of job competence and successful achievement in their crisis intervention work. Psychologists might educate shelter workers about the potential benefits of a sense of

personal accomplishment in work settings and assist them in identifying ways to achieve this sense of accomplishment (e.g., identify how their work is helpful to others).

Implications for the Organization and Efficiency of Shelter Programs

Given the frustrations felt by crisis workers in their attempts to make both immediate and long-term changes in the lives of those needing assistance, psychologists can prepare crisis workers for these stressors and help them to understand and normalize their feelings. The skills that psychologists have in assisting clients to explore, articulate, and examine myriad feelings could be used to assist crisis workers in managing their feelings and maximizing their potential to help others.

Shelter workers seek employment at crisis intervention settings to help battered women and their children, to accomplish the more long-term goal of ending the cycle of abuse, to contribute unique experiences to the program, and to fulfill work-related or educational requirements. Psychologists, in their consultation activities, might assist shelter program supervisors in their recruitment and retention efforts by directing supervisors' attention to these motives and by helping them target locations where individuals who have these intentions could be recruited.

The efficiency of crisis intervention settings necessitates adequate numbers of staff, effective communication, organized structure, and improved services. Consultation to shelter programs would emphasize identifying and implementing strategies for reducing work overload, improving communication among staff members, and enhancing the team effort approach. Furthermore, shelter workers should be mindful that experiencing the job as hectic and tense because of inadequate time to complete the work and heavy work loads is related to burnout, particularly when perceived social support is minimal or lacking. Moreover, other sources of stress related to burnout include the following: experiencing a lack of involvement or influence on decision making that directly affects oneself; feeling that one's abilities are not being used on the job and results are not being seen; having too much focus on fixed procedures, regulations, and paperwork; and being exposed to discomfort and danger on the job. Shelter workers who report these stressors could be educated about the relation of these stressors to burnout and assisted in identifying effective coping responses. In addition, psychologists could assist shelter programs in targeting interventions that will minimize these work-related stressors.

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