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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ROLE OF COUNSELLOR SUPERVISION IN MANAGEMENT OF BURNOUT AMONG COUNSELLORS
IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Counselling is a helping profession which involves caring for people with complex psychological and emotional needs. Working closely with people in pain, agony, grief, bereavement, trauma and other complex psycho-social needs often infects the counsellor with a patient's sadness, a condition often referred to as psychic poisoning or vicarious traumatization. This leads to a form of stress called burnout, a state of emotional depletion, lost ideals and purpose. Despite the levels of burnout that counsellors are predisposed to rarely is attention devoted to counsellors' psychological wellbeing. Major associations for counsellors all over the world are in agreement that burnout is inevitable and for this reason they make counsellor supervision a compulsory part of their code of ethics. Without adequate supervision, counsellors suffer burnout, may get impaired and fail to contribute optimally to the client. This paper investigates the role of counsellor supervision in managing burnout among counsellors in Kenya. A few suggestions of how counsellor supervision may help in managing burnout are also included in this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Burnout in Counselling

Burnout is the state of emotional, mental and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Figley 2002). It is an ongoing human reaction to on going stress and it relates to feelings that one's inner resources are inadequate for managing the tasks and situations presented to him. More accurately defined, burnout refers to depletion of emotional resource. Maslach (1996) states that it is a response to chronic emotional strain of dealing extensively with other human beings, particularly when they are troubled or having problems. Gachutha, (2009) defines burnout as diminished personal resources (low energy levels) that lead to diminished empathy (insecure attachments) and diminished effectiveness. She observes that burnout is a condition that impacts on the mind, body and soul (spirituality) of the practitioner incapacitating him or her and thus causing damage to the client.

Causes of Burnout in Counselling

The burnout phenomenon is typically prevalent in human service profession. Jobs that naturally experience high amount of occupational burnout include social workers, nurse, teacher and physician but it is much higher in counsellors due to high emotional involvement of the job (Dierendonck, Garssen, & Visser 2005). According to Mclead (2003) the burnout occurs when workers enter a human service profession with high and

unrealistic expectations and aspirations regarding the degree to which they will be able to help people. In many instances, the amount of help that is available or the effectiveness of intervention is limited. There are also too many clients for them all to be dealt with in an ideal manner. Zur (2003) notes that counselling is a profession with many and complicated hazards. The caring profession predisposes the therapist to high emotional depletion as a result of endlessly dealing with peoples' pains and crisis. Counsellors work in private settings and the codes and regulations concerning confidentiality and anonymity exuberate the counsellors' sense of loneliness and isolation which is a major cause of burnout. Zur (2003) seems to sympathise with counsellors' helpless and senses of inefficiency. He observes that unlike carpenters, gardeners or surgeons, counsellors rarely see immediate, profound or tangible results from their efforts. Even when therapy is effective clients leave and with them go the knowledge of long term effect of their work on their lives. The grief cycle that counsellors have to go through is another hazard that predispose counsellors to burnout. The endless cycle of introductions to new clients, conducting therapy and finally terminating relationship takes additional toll on practitioners. Therapists need to connect and disconnect on regular basis. In many cases clients terminate abruptly and counsellor are left to grieve without sufficient closure (Zur,2003). Perhaps the most, complex cause of burnout among counsellors is vicarious traumatisations that result from endless exposure to clients' depression, sadness and tribulations. Counsellors work constantly with people who feel suicidal or are grieving over

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loss of loved ones or those severely traumatized which takes a heavy toll on practitioners. The therapist can be infected with the condition called 'psychic poisoning' (Zur, 2003). The term 'vicarious traumatization' has been introduced in recent years to refer to the cumulative effect of trauma on the therapist working with survivors of catastrophic life events. Counsellors working in these situations often begin to experience images linked to scenes described by their clients and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Symptoms of Burnout

Burnout manifests primarily in the therapist emotional exhaustion and depersonalization of both their patients and themselves. Burnout has also been called "emotional fatigue", "emotional overload" or "compassionate fatigue", a condition when the therapist feels drained, depleted, all used up, with nothing else to give out. The depersonalization aspect of burnout manifest through general dislike of, and a detached and callous, even dehumanized attitude towards the people served. Zur (2003) observes that burned out counsellors experience low energy, reduced interest and satisfaction and often dreads work. Burnout in beginning counsellors is linked closely to emotional overload and a sense of inefficacy. Corey (2001) adds that counsellors tend not to see concrete result or fruits from their effort, often they feel oppressed by the system and the institutional demands which they contend, stifle any sense of personal initiative (Corey, 2001). Burnout is a process of realization and reflection of failure to find meaning in life and as Gachutha (2009) puts it, it blurs and erodes the helpers' initial ideals and hopes. It is important for counsellors to be aware of the factors that contribute to burnout, thus, it is important to turn our focus on the causes of burnout.

Role of Counsellor Supervision in Prevention of Burnout

All scholars in the field of occupational burnout overwhelmingly cite counsellor supervision as top on the list of strategies to overcome burnout. Zur (2003) says that as counsellors we must be involved in our own therapy. He notes that we are the main tool of our trade and thus the need to stay in tune through regular supervision and consultations. Janet (2003) observes that it is in supervision that we take our worries and concerns and offload our stresses and strain. The expression that the nature of counselling is such that we are giving out for the large part of the day and so, supervision becomes a way of taking in' – laying aside other peoples concerns and focus on our own needs. It is in supervision that we are likely to come up with new insights and recharge our energies and ideals. This is the restorative function which plays a healing role in the therapist life (Inskipp & Protor, 2001). Hawkins & Shohet (2000) emphasize the need to be pro-active in getting supervision for counsellors. First, they note, supervision is a central form of support, where counsellors can focus on their own difficulty as well as have the supervisor share some of the responsibility for our work with the client. Secondly, supervision forms part of the counsellors' continual learning and development as worker, including eventually helping them to become supervisors. A good supervisor can help counsellors use their own resources better, manage their work load and challenge their inappropriately patterned way of coping. Lack of supervision

has very negative outcomes on the counsellor and the therapeutic process. Shinwell (2009) says that without supervision a therapist can get burnout, get out of date, lose insight of the values and own issues may get in the way of the work. She adds that the counsellor can get confused, use inappropriate interventions and exploit clients unintentionally. Continued supervision eventually help the counsellor to develop the ability to supervise themselves; to constantly evaluate their work with clients objectively and trustfully (Gerald & Gerald, 2001, Bernard & Goodyear, 1992, Corey, *et al.*, 2007). Finally, the research of Hawkins, & Shohet, (2000) show that good supervision correlates with job satisfaction. A few suggestions on use of counsellor supervision in management of burnout are offered in the paragraphs below. This paper suggests a minimum of fortnight counsellor supervision. This is in agreement with the British Association of Professional Counsellors (BAPC, 2004). Where supervision is undertaken in a group, the counsellor may count their individual presentation time (rather than the total time the group meets) towards their supervision hours. According to the BAPC, (2004) counsellors should have sufficient specific supervisory time in order for them to maintain their well being. There are however a few other instances where a higher frequency of supervision may be recommended. Such would include instances where counsellors have a heavy workload. Where work is particularly demanding, perhaps in its emotional intensity and complexity for example in severe traumatization of ones clientele, the counsellor may double his/her supervision hours and keep reviewing the situation. The same thinking applies to any specific difficulties which the counsellor may be experiencing, whether they arise directly from the work or come from other areas of personal life. Supervision time should be specifically devoted to monitoring such difficulties. This paper recommends that counsellors undergo different forms of counsellor supervision including individual supervision (one –on –one /supervisor-supervisee supervision, group supervision and peer supervision.

Individual supervision would offer several apparent benefits to the counsellor. In this form of supervision, the supervisee and supervisor can decide to work on one issue without distraction. It also offers ample time to discuss every session of counselling thus, the supervisor can be reasonably sure that he/she has an overview of supervisees' total case load. Importantly, one – on – one nature of counsellor supervision duplicates the one-on one nature of most counselling and hence provides useful modelling as well as providing high degree of confidentiality. The study by Gachutha (2009) identifies enhanced focus, greater opportunity to examine progress, absence of competition and more security for better learning as advantages of individual supervision. Group supervision is effective method for exploration, trust building, personal and interpersonal growth. Powell, (2004) defines group supervision as a format in which a supervisor oversees a counsellor or a counsellor trainee's development in a group of supervisee peers. This allows frequent case presentation by each group member. Group supervision has apparent benefits. It offers an opportunity to learn from the way in which fellow supervisee handle their cases. There is also a great deal of stimulation and variety of perspectives on each supervisee's cases. This variety of perspectives acts as a corrective against the single supervisor's biases or blind-spots. As well, the make

- up of the group may provide useful opportunities for the role – plays to be experimented with. Group supervision may be very economical in training settings, in voluntary organizations or for those supervisees whose counselling work does not pay them much (Collin & Windy, 1994). Peer supervision would be another important option for counsellors. Powell, (2004) considers it an efficient means of providing feedback to counsellors. In peer supervision, three or more counsellors share the responsibility for providing each other's supervision within the group context. Despite the absence of the master clinician, depth of experience and learning, this adaptation offers counsellors in-expensive means of growth and input. Peer supervision assumes some degree of equality among the participants who function as colleagues. In peer supervision all participants share and discuss issues in a spirit of equality. There is also need to ensure all round counsellor supervision focusing on the three main functions of Counsellor Supervision including the educational, supportive and administrative Function. Educational function is crucial because it allows supervisees to reflect on their own work with clients in the presence of an experienced person who facilitates this reflection. This function helps the counsellor to understand the client better, become more aware of their own reactions and responses to the client and understand the dynamics of how their clients are interacting. Educational function also helps the counsellor to look at how they intervened and the consequences of their interventions. The counsellor also learns other ways of working with different client situations. Counsellors are helped to develop understanding and skill in their work. Further, they receive information and other perspectives concerning their work. Supportive function should also be part of holistic supervision because it offers counsellors the encouragement they need to explore their way of working with clients. This function is concerned with expressive needs of the counsellor. The supervisee is helped to prevent the development of potentially stressful situations in her practice. This communicates confidence in the counsellor and provides opportunities for independent functioning and for probable success in tasks achievement. As part of the supportive function the counsellor is validated both as a person and as a worker and is not left to carry unnecessarily complex problems and projections alone. Administrative Function is highly recommended because it enables the supervisee to monitor their own work as professionals. It is under the administrative function that the supervisors become advocates of clients and of the counselling profession, making sure that service is rendered and that ethical and professional dimensions are maintained at a high level. According to Kadushin (1992) administrative function empowers counsellors towards correct, effective and appropriate implementation of agency policies and procedures.

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