

School Counselors: Risk of Accumulated Stress

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June 8, 2020

Abstract

Counselors in the school setting may undergo a high amount of stress because of the nature of their profession. Professional counselors, who manage stress, can be more effective in the school, the profession, and their life. This literature review examines the types of stressors in the school environment and professional responsibilities that promote stress. Recommendations are included for counselors, school settings, and professional development. In addition, practices to manage stress in counselor programs and school settings are included.

Keywords: stress, school counselors, types of stress, stress management, stress management techniques

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Counselor's Roles

School environments for counselors are quite different from that of a therapist in an office. As a professional school counselor, the researcher is familiar with the duties and responsibilities in school settings. School counselors may take on a range of responsibilities to address problems that may interfere with student learning such as individual/group counseling on academic, career, and personal issues, as well as, student discipline (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Other duties may include collaboration with agencies (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2012), peer mediator sponsor, test and career fair coordinator, bully prevention program, classroom guidance instruction, student and parent workshop presenter, drug prevention chairperson, and coordinator of specific assemblies. With more than 10 million children a year in the U.S. experiencing trauma of abuse, violence, natural disasters, and other adverse events that cause significant emotional and behavioral problems, the ultimate result is their need to seek a mental health professional (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.) such as a school counselor.

Stress, School Environments, and Trauma

Stress is known as the 'flight or fight' response (Harvard Medical School, 2018). One may experience stress from four sources: social stressors, environmental, physical, or perceptual (Davis, Eshelman, & McKay, 2008). How one interprets, perceives, and labels an experience and one's prediction of the future can also affect the response (Davis, et al., 2008).

Stress is a physical and emotional reaction that people experience as they encounter changes in life (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2020). Those under stress may feel worried, irritable, depressed, or experience an inability to focus (U. S.

Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Stress can be either acute or chronic. Acute stress can occur in response to a short-term stressor and chronic stress occurs when stressors continue long-term (APA, 2019). Long-term stress may contribute to or worsen a range of health problems including digestive disorders, headaches, sleep disorders, and other symptoms (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2020).

School Environment

Role conflict and ambiguity are potential stressors that many school counselors experience with multiple job tasks (Butler & Constantine, 2005). These wide responsibilities can lead to conflicts between the different roles, which may lead to counselors' stress. A study by Schmaltz (2016) indicated that as school counselors' work satisfaction decreased, school counselors' perceived stress increased. Depending on the school setting, counselor stress can easily progress to emotional dissonance, which precipitates burnout. According to a study by Nobles (2011) on school counselor burnout, 72.9% indicated that they sometimes, often, or always feel overstressed.

Emotional dissonance is the frequency of displayed emotions (usually calm) not genuinely felt (neutral or negative) and conceived as stressful (Ogińska-Bulik, 2005). Emotional dissonance is unavoidable when counselors defuse situations and counsel clients through grief, anger, and dejection. Ogińska-Bulik (2005) indicates that frequent emotional dissonance leads to the incapability to regulate one's own emotions, which depletes internal resources.

High levels of stress may be present in school environments. Findings indicate "Work overload, lack of rewards and social relations appeared to be the most stressful work-related factors" (Ogińska-Bulik, 2005, p. 173). Experiencing these stressors over a number of months or years may cause burnout. Yet, despite some symptoms of burnout, Butler and Constantine (2005)

found that counselors did experience a positive sense of professional pride and accomplishment in the workplace.

Urban School Environment

Counselors in school settings may deal with the same stressors as teachers. Ogińska-Bulik (2005) reports that human service workers or counselors experience high levels of stress, with teachers observed as having the highest levels. Butler and Constantine (2005) “found that school counselors working in urban school environments reported significantly higher levels of burnout than did their peers working in other types of school environments” (para.1). Counselors employed in urban environments with exposure to unique issues reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion and feelings of depersonalization than did their counterparts in suburban, rural, and other settings (Butler & Constantine).

Public school environments may be stressful. One may experience stress from environmental factors (Davis, et al., 2008). According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (Healthy School Environments, 2017)

a 2005 survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics, 43% of public school principals reported that a variety of environmental factors (e.g., indoor air quality, ventilation, and day lighting) interfered with the delivery of instruction in permanent school buildings (para.1).

According to Nobles (2011), distressed counselors may experience external stressors that may interfere with the counseling process. In a stressed environment, school counselors may fail to process information appropriately or make a clear decision, which is equivalent to an unfocused stressed child in a learning environment (Van Velsor, 2009).

Secondary Trauma

As the range of problems continues within the world, trauma has a profound effect on children. Any professional who works directly with traumatized children in a position to hear the recounting of traumatic experiences is at risk for secondary traumatic stress (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). “Secondary traumatic stress is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another” (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d., para.1). School counselors may counsel a student with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during a crisis while the student is under the care of an outside agency. In addition, a child may report traumatic events to the school counselor as she seeks to assist in linking the child and family to a mental health agency. Listening to traumatic stories of their students may take an emotional toll that compromises professional functioning and diminishes their quality of life (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

Prevention and Care

During stressful periods, school counselors must maintain adequate sleep patterns. Worry and stress may make it difficult to get adequate sleep. Van Dongen, Maislin, Mullington, and Dinges (2007) indicate that moderate sleep restriction can seriously impair behavior in healthy adults. It is important for school counselors to sustain and strengthen their health. This is because long-term stress may have health consequences ranging from fatigue to obesity and heart disease (APA, 2007). Numerous studies have shown that one can manage stress successfully and enjoy better physical health with the support of a spouse, close friend, or formal support group (Duffy, Kirsch, & Atwater, 2014). Further research on how School Counselor’s personal relationships with family and friends can contribute to wellness will be helpful in identifying some self-sustaining behaviors (Nobel, 2011).

Proper rest, nutrition, exercise, and stress reduction activities are also important in preventing secondary traumatic stress. “Protecting against the development of secondary traumatic stress includes factors such as longer duration of professional experience and the use of evidence-based practices in the course of providing care” (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d., Introduction). According to Schmaltz (2016), one of the first steps in recognizing whether counselor impairments exist is for counselors to examine their perceived stress and stressors in relation to work-task satisfaction. School counselors must recognize the need to seek therapy for themselves. Orlinsky, Norcross, Rennestad, & Wiseman, (2005) concluded that personal therapy for counselors contributes to improving interpersonal skills, flexibility in meeting the needs of clients, protects clients from counselor’s own unresolved issues, and allows the counselor to manage stress and renew self.

School counselors may also benefit from seeking green spaces. This may be in the area of outdoor spaces, plants, forest photographs, woodland videos, imagery, or garden screen savers. “Health benefits from forests and green spaces: boost immune system, reduces stress, improves mood, and sleep, increases the ability to focus even in children with ADHD, accelerates recovery from surgery or illness, and increases energy level” (Department of Environmental Conservation, 2020, para. 2). These visual images may encourage school counselors to take a short break at school or at home. Many counselors are inundated with staying available in the building for crisis, duties, and other aspects of their profession that they may be unaware of the importance of breaks. According to the American Counseling Association website (ACA) (2020), self-care is a necessary tool that can be essential when dealing with stress. School counselors can seek minimal time outdoors. School counselors may also access the internet for videos of relaxing

outdoor spaces, gardens, trees, and woodlands. A plant in the office may be a boost to their mood and can serve as a project for their counselees.

Counselors need to be aware of tension in their bodies, which may lead to health issues. According to a study by Nobles (2011), 70.4% indicated that they sometimes, often, or always feel tightness in their back and shoulders. School counselors may utilize progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, yoga, tai chi (Mayo Clinic, 2020), mindfulness, breath focus, and qi gong, repetitive prayer, or guided imagery (Harvard Medical School, 2018) for stress relief. Mindfulness, meditation, and relaxation techniques may be useful in the school counselor's programs to assist students with anxiety and stress reduction. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (2019) has counselor curriculums, videos, and podcasts that school counselors may access.

School counselors have the opportunity to assist students with stress management and develop methods for themselves. They may access numerous websites and school based group and classroom lessons from a variety of sources. In addition, the ACA (2020.) website has resources that focus on self-care for counselors.

Implications

Various responsibilities and time constraints can lead to conflicts between the different roles counselors must assume, which may lead to counselors' stress. According to Duffy, Kirsch, and Atwater (2014), we tend to experience an event as less stressful when we have reasonable control over it. "Individual and supervisory awareness of the effects of this indirect trauma exposure is a basic part of protecting the health of the worker and ensuring that children consistently receive the best possible care from those who are committed to helping them" (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d., para 1)

Though school counselors may assist with stress reduction for staff and students, they must be mindful of their own stress level. Constant support of others may deplete their reserves of support and health. One implementation is to attend professional development, take time to address constraints, their health, and responsibility overload.

School counselors may need to speak with their supervisors or seek mental health services for themselves. School counselors must maintain their mental health so that they function effectively during crisis and stressful circumstances. A study by Nobles (2011) results indicated that school counselor caseload size influences exhaustion. Thomas and Schmuldt (2011) indicate that, unfortunately, wellness education remains a minimal activity among counselor educators.

Promoting stress management behaviors during internship may encourage students to adopt these behaviors as they transition into their school counselor professions (Thomas & Schmuldt, 2011). Nobles' (2011) study revealed that caseload size definitely influences exhaustion. Nobles' survey results demonstrated that school counselors with between 1 and 300 students on their caseloads reported the lowest level of burnout. This is also important for those experiencing secondary trauma. Research indicates that risk is also higher for professionals who carry a heavy caseload of traumatized children; are socially or organizationally isolated; or receive inadequate training (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d). Thomas and Schmuldt (2011) indicate that to enhance wellness; counselor educators can infuse wellness into the curriculum: and counselors and counselor educators can enrich wellness within the classroom. It is important for school counselors to create awareness of self and strive to protect their mental health, so that they can, in turn, assist with the mental well-being of their school clients.

Professional school counselors, who manage stress, can be more effective in the school, the profession, and live healthier lives.

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