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“Identification and Prevention of Secondary Traumatic Stress in Mental Health Professionals Who Work With Child Sexual Abuse Victims”

Abstract

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is an issue that may be experienced by mental health professionals who are exposed to clients' trauma materials and become at risk of becoming traumatized themselves. Mental health professionals working with sexually abused children are more vulnerable to STS due to their empathic engagement and level of exposure to trauma. The impact of STS can result in poor productivity, increase in illness, and turnover rates for mental health professionals. Cumulative effects of STS make awareness and early intervention imperative. Research has shown that members of the helping profession suffer emotional and physical illness more often than other professions. The vicariousness of empathy or secondary trauma is discussed in the literature as the quality of putting oneself into another's shoes of situation. When you care for and take on another's feelings mental health professionals may be at risk for psychological and negative physical effects.

The purpose of this scholarly project was to a) identify the presence and level of STS symptoms; (b) provide a STS education program and prevention plan; and (c) evaluate the effectiveness of the STS program and prevention plan among mental health professionals who work with child sexual abuse (CSA) victims. After education and prevention training, the mental health professionals developed a personal STS prevention plan and were evaluated again for symptoms of STS in five weeks.

Comparisons of mental health professionals' total STSS pretest and posttest scores were not statistically significant (t (15) = -1.102, p = .288), with no reduction in scores. However, there is evidence of STS in the survey population. The majority (n = 7, 44%) of the participants (N = 16) experienced mild symptoms of STS and may be experiencing negative effects of STS. The most frequently reported STS symptom was avoidance related to work with clients. Implications for practice include increased awareness, identification and prevention of STS. This may decrease staff illness and turnover rates and increase productivity. The ability of mental health professionals to empathetically engage with the client without symptoms of STS may ultimately improve the therapeutic relationship and patient outcomes.