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The Role of Mindfulness for Clinician Burnout during Covid-19

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Abstract

Clinician burnout is a well-documented, cyclical, and deleterious phenomenon exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Mindfulness, which has been implicated in the prevention and treatment of burnout, is especially indicated during the pandemic. Emergent research supports its application to healthcare personnel towards reduction in stress and burnout, and increased wellbeing.

Keywords: Clinician Burnout; Mindfulness; Covid-19

Introduction

Burnout & Covid-19

Clinician burnout is a well-documented phenomenon with deleterious consequences in areas of personal health and wellbeing [1], self-efficacy [2], and quality of care [3]. During the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing demands are placed upon an already stressed workforce, which can exacerbate problems of burnout [4,5]. Although burnout has historically been viewed as an occupational phenomenon, Peinado and Anderson [6] argue overwhelming social stressors related to the pandemic intersect with work-related stressors to create a perfect storm of suffering. This aligns with research that suggests that amidst counselors, personal and contextual factors account for a significant amount of burnout symptoms [7]. Burnout is characterized by three main components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal effectiveness [3]. It represents a chronic, rather than situational and temporary coping detachment, and if left unaddressed, is progressive and cyclical [8]. For example, when exhausted, stressed, or overworked, clinicians can become overwhelmed in sessions. As a protection mechanism, they might distance themselves from clients, which leads to a disruption in the therapeutic alliance. As

this goes on and they become increasingly tired and more distant, feel less able to do their jobs well, which cycles into even more exhaustion, detachment, and decreased self-efficacy. To prevent or disrupt this cycle, it is important for individuals to develop an attunement to self and use that information to identify and address problems early.

Mindfulness Practice for Burnout Symptoms

Especially when considering burnout amidst the pandemic, we are called to remember that helping professionals typically have difficulty providing themselves with the attuned presence and kindness they so willingly give to others [9&10]. While the lay approach to treating burnout resembles avoidance coping strategies or superficial self-care, what is needed in these troubling times is a deeper solution. One strategy may be mindfulness, which is commonly cited within literature related to prevention and mitigation of burnout [1,3,7,9,11,12]. Mindfulness practices seek to shift cognitive perceptions through the development of an observer's awareness characterized by nonjudgmental and compassionate attention which permits a person to apprehend internal and external stimuli with clarity rather than reacting based



on memories, associations, and faulty beliefs [12,13]. Through this whole-person engagement, a person becomes less reactive to cognitions which decreases rumination, promotes positive personal growth and agency [13] and self-directed kindness [12]. In this current climate, clinicians are in need of resources to be more present with themselves, their relationships, and their clients. Similar to past findings, emergent research during the pandemic suggests that mindfulness may be indicated for treating and preventing burnout. Klatt and colleagues [14] found that implementing an 8-week mindfulness and movement (yoga stretches) group for medical center employees amidst the Covid-19 pandemic significantly reduced burnout symptoms. Similarly, Zhu [15] discovered that amongst healthcare practitioners in China, those who practiced meditation displayed lower scores in depression, stress, and anxiety related to the pandemic. Conversano et al. [16] found that dispositional mindfulness was associated with increased wellbeing related to Covid-19 psychological distress.

Conclusion

Clinician burnout may exacerbate from the Covid-19 pandemic due to added workplace stressors, social and societal strain, and challenges to personal coping. Yet emergent research in the application of mindfulness suggests there is hope. Finding a new relationship with the self, grounded in awareness, kindness and nonjudgment may be the key to having a healthier practice of caring for others. Mindfulness, an ancient tradition, continues to foster new possibilities for clinicians to achieve balance and wellbeing.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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