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Improved Social Relationships May Limit Job Burnout Risks
Investigators Cite ‘Unique’ Program Tested in Mexican Mental Health Clinic

Intervention programs aimed at improving employees’ social connections and relationships, particularly those involving intimacy, “vulnerable self-disclosure” and emotional courage, could reduce job burnout and enhance the organizational climate in high-stress work settings.

That’s the conclusion of scientists in a study, *A Preliminary Test of a Social Connectedness Burnout Intervention for Mexican Mental Health Professionals*, published in the June 2019 issue of *The Psychological Record*.

The authors conducted what they say was a unique burnout-prevention program due to its “novel content,” online protocol and first-time use among outpatient mental health professionals in Latin America. Setting for the research was the Borderline Personality Disorder Clinic of the National Psychiatric Institute in Mexico City.

Called the Helping the Helper Program (HTHP), the six-week intervention included in-session exercises and homework assignments – all designed to evoke and reinforce behaviors identified as important to intimacy and to encourage the six participating clinic therapists to increase their social relationships among colleagues in the workplace, writes lead study investigator Adam M. Kuczynski, clinical psychologist at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Behavioral variables considered important to intimacy for purposes of the study were based on the Interpersonal Process Model (IPM), a “well-established social psychological model of intimacy,” the scientists report. Under IPM, feelings of closeness and intimacy develop between two individuals when “person A engages in a vulnerable self-disclosure and person B responds...with understanding, validation and caring,” according to the study.

Despite its “unique” elements, the intervention program undergoing testing applied well-known principles of Functional Analytic Psychotherapy or FAP, study authors say. Grounded in clinical behavior analysis, FAP focuses on the “therapeutic relationship” and the interpersonal behaviors that occur in sessions with therapists.

“Job burnout consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment,” the scientists write in their study report. “Burnout decreases work quality, motivation, communication, empathy, and results in avoidance, poor relationships and impaired client care and satisfaction.”

Burnout also can take a physical toll on workers, prompting stress-related disorders, such as hypertension, migraine headaches, joint and back pain, duodenal ulcers – even mental health issues, lack of concentration and poor decision-making, experts say.

Especially at risk for burnout are mental health professionals – a reason why researchers trialed their intervention at a personality disorder clinic, involving five psychologists and one psychiatrist.

This latest study builds on previous investigations to find the most effective strategies for reducing prevalence of stress and burnout in the work setting. Prior burnout interventions, particularly among mental health nurses, have focused on clinical supervision, psychosocial interventions and social support with mixed results, state authors of an article published in a 2015 issue of the *European Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*.

“The complexity of the [burnout] issue, with different clinical environments, different interventions and different outcome measures, makes it difficult to identify a single, clearly effective strategy or set of strategies,” state the writers of the *European Journal* article.

Kuczynski and colleagues, however, found that study volunteers “demonstrated large and reliable improvements” in measures of social relationships, closeness and support at the conclusion of the intervention, indicating that their study’s “modified” protocol could prove effective for enhancing workplace relationships and organizational climate.

They admit that their research has limitations, including lack of a control group, reliance on participant self-reporting and use of testing not tailored to individual participants’ skill strengths and deficits,” but say results point to the “potential of experimental FAP training...to produce personal and workplace benefits of public health significance for participants when modified into a Helping the Helper program.”

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