The Issue Is

Fieldwork Students Under Stress

Although the subject of burnout has been explored extensively in the health care literature during the last decade (see the review by Ursprung, 1986), relatively few studies have addressed the issue of burnout in students during professional training. Burnout, a debilitating psychological condition brought about by unrelieved stress, tension, and anxiety, impairs a person's physical and mental health and work performance (Cronin-Stubbis & Schaffner, 1985; McGuire, 1979; Venings, 1982).

Two recent related studies of student nurses ($N = 279$ and $N = 283$) revealed that more than half of those surveyed reported a high level of burnout (Haack, 1987, 1988). The level of burnout that they experienced increased with each additional year they spent in school as they became more involved in clinical training (Haack, 1988). The student nurses' mean scores on the Staff Burnout Scale for Health Professionals (Jones, 1980) were comparable to those of registered nurses working in hospital emergency rooms (Haack, 1987).

Brust (1986) suggested that it is the loss of control caused by supervisory pressure, the grading system, and the timing of treatment that lead to burnout in students. In addition to the sources of stress that a clinician normally experiences in the work setting, unique stresses are experienced by students in clinical settings. Some predisposing factors that contribute to stress include (a) fear of failure, (b) not knowing what the clinical supervisor expects, (c) uncertainty about performance, and (d) feelings of powerlessness (Brust, 1986). One of the major concerns frequently expressed by both occupational and physical therapy students in fieldwork was unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships with supervisors or other team members (Christie, Joyce, & Moeller, 1985a; Walsh, Schütz, & Olson, 1986). Indeed, interpersonal conflict has been identified as a significant source of stress that leads to burnout (Muldary, 1983).

The Supervisor's Role in Reducing Stress

Ideally, a supervisor in a clinical setting should help the student reduce the stress generated by interpersonal conflict. These clinical supervisors usually receive little formal training in the supervision and counseling of students (Barker, 1986; Christie, Joyce, & Moeller, 1985b; Edwards & Baptiste, 1987; Ryan, 1987), however, which leaves their competence in these areas open to criticism. In addition, supervisory clinicians generally experience higher levels of burnout than staff clinicians and occupational therapists (Brollic, Bendler, Cyranowski, & Vellieri, 1986, 1987).

These conditions are not conducive to providing proper supervision and emotional support to fieldwork students. In extreme cases, students may receive no supervision for several weeks during their fieldwork experience, which may cause them to feel helpless and uncertain. Furthermore, a burnout-out clinician supervising a student may project his or her negative personal feelings about clinical practice on the student, which can discourage and prevent the student from learning.

Pressler (1983) emphasized that the role model provided by a student supervisor can greatly influence the student's development of professional behavior and identity. Two studies demonstrated a strong correlation between supervisory behavior and a supervisee's burnout (Cherniss, 1988; Stout, 1984). Although the influence of the clinical supervisor on the student's attitudes, professional values, and perceptions of the profession has not been systematically studied, it has been suggested that clinical supervisors do influence students' professional development as well as their future role perceptions and career choices (Brust, 1986; Christie et al., 1985a).

Because burned-out student supervisors may have a detrimental effect on the quality of student training, and because students have little control over who will be their supervisor, I believe it is important to put more effort into improving supervisors' behaviors and skills. Concurrently, educators can better equip their students to understand and handle the conflict-ridden situation properly, keeping in mind that the students of today are the student supervisors of tomorrow.
Stress-Reducing Seminar

part of the problem of burnout lies inadequate professional preparation and lack of awareness (Spaniol, 1979), then a better designed curriculum may alleviate the problem. A seminar on the issue of burnout could be included in the academic program before students start their fieldwork experiences. The seminar could be conducted in two parts. The first part could give a general overview of burnout, for example, the definition of burnout, the personality most susceptible to burnout, the causes of burnout, and burnout’s manifest symptoms.

The second part of the seminar could discuss different strategies to prevent or manage burnout, focusing on the resolution of interpersonal conflicts. Case discussions and role-playing of some of the situations that students may encounter in their fieldwork experience, on the basis of experiences of previous students, could be used as teaching modalities. Through the sharing of feelings and ideas, students could learn how to deal tactfully with ambiguous and conflict-causing situations without harming their interpersonal relationships with their supervisors or with other team members. Practical situations for discussion could include ways to seek appropriate help without intruding on supervisors and ways to work with a difficult supervisor (e.g., one who is burned out, irresponsible, not sufficiently knowledgeable, or giving mixed messages).

Summary

Many times there are no ideal answers to any of the interpersonal conflicts addressed. Often the solutions to these situations may depend on an individual’s characteristics or personality. By analyzing the situation and the supervisor’s attitude and then changing his or her way of responding to that situation, however, the student may improve his or her problem-solving skills. The student can modify the strategies taught in these seminars to suit his or her individual needs and particular situations. A seminar like this can provide students and thus future therapists and student supervisors, with a solid background in dealing more tactfully with a variety of conflict-ridden situations in the workplace. ▲

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References


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