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ABSTRACT

School psychologists are often subject to severe stress when they work with troubled families and children. Burnout from physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion as a result of the chronic stress is not uncommon in the profession. One problem of being attentive to the needs of others is that the caregiver's needs often get overlooked or forgotten. Developing self-awareness can help school psychologists become more proactive towards early signs of burnout. This article looks at the physical signs of stress and the research regarding school psychologists' experience with stress and burnout. It also considers some stress management techniques and suggests that if school psychologists are more attuned to their own signs of stress, they can be proactive in assessing their own needs and implementing some of the strategies to reduce stress and burnout. (Contains 18 references.) (JDM)

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**From the presentation "Stress Management Skills for School Psychologists: A Capital Idea!" at  
the 2001 annual conference of the National Association of School Psychologists**

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### Abstract

School psychologists are often subject to intense stressors from their jobs as they work with families and children who are themselves stressed. Burnout, or physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion as a product of chronic stress is not uncommon in school psychologists. School psychologists may be so busy caring for others that they forget to be attuned to their own needs. Being self aware and vigilant toward themselves will result in a more proactive stance toward early signs of burnout. In this article, we look at the physical effects of stress, research regarding the school psychologist, stress, and burnout, and last, at some stress management techniques for the school psychologist. If school psychologists are more attuned to their own signs of stress, they can be proactive in assessing their own needs and implementing some of these strategies to reduce stress and burnout and to ensure happier, more productive functioning in all areas of their lives.

### **Stress, Burnout, and School Psychologists**

**Stress is physical, mental, or emotional tension that is present in our daily lives and can arise from many sources. Both short term and long term stress can significantly affect us physically, cognitively, and emotionally. School psychologists are often subject to intense stressors from their jobs as they work with families and children who are themselves stressed. Burnout, or physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion as a product of chronic stress is not uncommon in school psychologists.**

**School psychologists may be so busy caring for others that they forget to be attuned to their own needs. Being self aware and vigilant toward themselves will result in a more proactive stance toward early signs of burnout. Some common symptoms of burnout are:**

- **Chronic fatigue**
- **Cynicism, negativism, irritability**
- **Anger at those making demands**
- **Self-criticism for putting up with demands**
- **Sense of being besieged**
- **Hair-trigger display of emotions**
- **Rigidity of attitude**
- **Cold, detached, less empathetic behavior**
- **Accompanying physical symptoms such as headaches, loss of appetite, chest or back pains, nervousness**

### Physiological responses to stress

Most of us have experienced the immediate physiological response to stress: the brain dulls the body's sense of pain, the pupils of the eyes dilate for better vision, the heart brings extra oxygen to the lungs and glucose to muscles, the adrenal glands secrete adrenaline, the spleen releases extra red blood cells which allow the blood to carry more oxygen to muscles, and the intestines stop digestion, allowing energy to go to muscles. About five to ten minutes later, there is a delayed physiological response to stress. In the brain the pituitary signals the hypothalamus to produce ACTH, which stimulates the adrenal cortex, and the hippocampus (a center of memory and learning) gets activated to process the stress. In the immune system infection-fighting is diminished, the liver converts fat to usable fuel, and the adrenal cortex secretes cortisol, which regulates metabolism and immunity. Chronic stress, which occurs over time, can result in responses that are toxic. Cortisol becomes toxic to brain cells and can damage cognitive ability. Fatigue, anger, and depression increase. In the immune system, repeated suppression of disease-fighting cells ultimately weakens resistance to infection. Decreases in blood flow to the intestines leaves the mucous lining vulnerable to ulcers. In the circulatory system elevated blood pressure and heart rate damage elasticity of blood vessels.

Many researchers have studied the effects of chronic stress. Holmes and Rahe (1967) felt that many life events, if they occurred in a limited length of time, caused a stress response. Glaser (2001) found that people who cared for spouses with dementia did not respond to a flu vaccine as well as a control group. Cohen (2001) found that people who ranked high on a psychological test of perceived stress were more likely to develop colds when they were intentionally infected with a respiratory virus. He repeated the study in 2000 and found that while a single large, stressful event in the preceding year did not affect the subjects chances of

falling ill, chronic stress (ongoing conflicts with co-workers or family members, for instance) increased the odds of becoming ill by as much as 3 to 5 times.

The manner in which one deals with stress may have been greatly influenced by early childhood experiences. Children raised in orphanages or in neglectful homes may have elevated levels of glucocorticoids and are less able to deal with stress in later life. Researchers at the Developmental Traumatology Laboratory (DeBellis, Keshavan, Clark, Casy, Giedd, Boring, Frustaci, & Ryan, 1999), believed that levels of catecholaminergic neurotransmitters and steroid hormones which increase during traumatic experiences in childhood could adversely affect brain development. Researchers at the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota (Gunnar, Brodersen, Nachmias, Buss, & Rigatuso, 1996; Hertsgaard, Gunnar, Erickson, & Nachmias, 1995; Nachmias, Gunnar, Mangelsdord, Parritz, & Buss, 1996) have done numerous studies of infant and toddlers' behavior, coping skills, and temperament. In general, children who are reared in emotionally supportive families show lower levels of stress hormones and greater coping skills in dealing with novel and/or stressful situations.

#### School Psychologists, Stress, and Burnout

Wise (1985) did a survey of school psychologists to determine their rankings of stressful events on their job. Factor analysis yielded these stressful-event clusters:

- Interpersonal Conflict,
- High Risk to Self and Others,
- Obstacles to Efficient Job Performance,
- Public Speaking,
- Time Management,
- Keeping District "Legal,"

- Hassles,
- Professional Enrichment, and
- Insufficient Recognition of Work.

The factor with the highest loading was interpersonal conflict. As Wise pointed out, all of the items in this category involved disagreement between the professional judgment of the school psychologist and the judgment of others. The factor with the second highest loading, named High Risk to Self and Others involved crisis situations. Although they happen infrequently, these crises can have significant ramifications for the school psychologist. The factor with the third highest loading, called Obstacles to Efficient Job Performance, included lack of competent supervision and lack of appropriate assessment materials. Other obstacles included in this factor were lack of professional aids such as secretarial help, lack of time to perform duties and to collaborate with colleagues. The fourth factor, Public Speaking, included conducting workshops or public talks with parents, teachers, or others. Fifth, Time Management, involved finding the time to perform the job, especially writing reports and taking referrals. Respondents seemed to feel that they always had a backlog of reports and referrals. Sixth, Keeping District "Legal" referred to being in compliance with local, state, and federal guidelines. Seventh, Hassles, included carrying test equipment and driving from school to school. Eighth, Professional Enrichment, was keeping up with professional readings. The ninth factor was insufficient recognition of one's work.

When Wise (1985), compared factors in terms of gender, she found that males were significantly more stressed than females in terms of keeping district "legal" and insufficient recognition of work. On the other hand, females were more stressed by crisis situations, public speaking, time management, and hassles. Wise concluded that, according to the survey, most

school psychologists found their job moderately stressful. She noted that many of the stress-rated events which were reported as highly stressful are those that do not occur very frequently.

Burden (1988) surveyed 20 English and 20 Australian school psychologists who completed the school psychologist's stress inventory developed by P.S. Wise (1985). Results were compared with the United States data obtained by Wise. Similar levels of stress were reported in all three countries, but school psychologists in the United States reported more stress due to a backlog of written reports.

In 1988 Huberty and Huebner conducted a national survey of burnout among school psychologists. They defined burnout as (1) emotional exhaustion and being overwhelmed by work demands, (2) depersonalization, and (3) reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Each participant (234 responded) provided demographic information, answered a job-related stress questionnaire, and completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The factor analysis of the stress items revealed four significant factors: (1) Job and Role Definitions, (2) Time Pressures, (3) External Pressures, and (4) Internal Pressures. The researchers concluded that "the major correlates of burnout identified in this study included clarity of role definitions, time pressures that result from excessive demands (e.g., heavy caseloads), external pressures beyond their control (e.g., teacher pressure), and internal pressures regarding how school psychologists perceived themselves (e.g., personality conflicts)" (p. 59). The research suggested that school psychologists should be made aware of the types of stressors they are likely to encounter and should develop positive coping skills.

Huebner (1993a) analyzed responses of 179 school psychologists who responded to a survey of burnout. He found that 25% reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, 3% reported high depersonalization, and 12% reported low levels of personal accomplishment. Thirty-five



percent of school psychologists surveyed indicated some desire to leave the profession within the next 5 years. Huebner (1993b) stated that the results of several studies converge to indicate that burnout may be an important problem among school psychologists. He identified three major sources of stress for school psychologists: (1) organizational factors such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, (2) interpersonal factors such as poor supervisors and lack of positive feedback as well as a low degree of peer support, and (3) intrapersonal factors including inadequate preparation for the job and personality characteristics such as workaholism and Type A behavior, lack of commitment to work, low self-esteem, empathy, external locus of control, job-related expectations, and attributional style.

Mills and Huebner (1998), measured stress in school psychologists over a 7-month period and found that approximately 40% of school psychologists reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, 10% reported depersonalization reactions, and 19% reported a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. They concluded that many school psychologists are chronically stressed on the job.

#### Stress Management Skills for School Psychologists

Why are some school psychologists more susceptible to burnout than others? Sandoval (1993) examined the relationship between personality characteristics and burnout. School psychologists with well-integrated personalities were less prone to burnout than others.

Some specific suggestions to school psychologists for combating burnout were suggested by Huebner (1993b). Intrapersonal strategies include continuing education, relaxation techniques, time management, realistic goal setting, recreational outlets, and a focus on problem-focused stress management more than emotion-focused or palliative efforts. Another strategy is for the school psychologist to undertake an individualized assessment of his/her perceived

antecedents of stress, in conjunction with a supervisor or a peer. As a result of this assessment the school psychologist could develop systematic, individualized stress management intervention plans. Huebner (1994) stresses the importance of the supervisor in recognizing and attending to burnout symptoms in the school psychologist. Support from supervisors was the strongest contributor to school psychologists' well-being, although support from friends and co-workers was also influential.

The supervisor can help, not only by recognizing the symptoms which the school psychologist may overlook, but by assisting in the development of the stress management intervention plans. If burnout symptoms are more severe, then expediting referral to appropriate treatment centers may be needed. At the interpersonal level, the most frequent recommendation is participation in professional support groups (Huebner, 1993b). There are many organizational changes that may be beneficial to the school psychologist but Huebner (1992) found that their use of organization-focused change strategies is uncommon. Some organizational changes that could have an impact on the job of school psychologist are: negotiating a revised job description, changing administrative structure, changing the referral system, streamlining the paperwork process, securing fiscal resources through grant writing, and developing systematic decision-making procedures for multidisciplinary teams.

On the bright side, school psychologists are, by virtue of their training, aware of common stress management techniques such as meditation, massage, exercise, social support, proper diet, relaxation techniques, mini and maxi vacations, hobbies. According to Hoff & Buchholz, (1996), creativity and "alonetime" are presently untapped inborn resources that represent flexible and viable coping tools. If school psychologists are more attuned to their own functioning, they can be proactive in assessing their own needs and implementing some of these general techniques or

**job-related strategies to reduce stress and burnout and to ensure happier, more productive functioning in all areas of their lives.**

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