



Combating Vicarious Trauma Through the Use of Exercise for Self-care

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Abstract

Vicarious trauma is characterized as a psychological response that can occur in counselors as a result of empathic engagement with clients who have experienced emotional distress after witnessing or being involved in a traumatic event or situation. Novice professional counselors entering the field often provide services to clients who have experienced significant trauma and who endorse trauma-related symptoms. Repeated exposure to these traumatic details leave novice counselors more susceptible to developing vicarious trauma. The American Counseling Association *Code of Ethics* requires professional counselors to adhere to ethical codes related to counselor self-care and personal well-being. Decades of literature supports this ethical mandate and suggests that counselors ensure they regularly engage in self-care activities, such as exercise, to decrease risk of impairment and burnout, while upholding their ethical obligation to do no harm and being competent in the services they provide. Integrating an exercise-based self-care program, as well as engaging in supervision, consultation, and training to increase skills for providing trauma-informed care, can be used a beneficial tool for novice counselors to use in order to combat and mitigate the impact of vicarious trauma.



Self-care for Counselors

- Self-care is a process where counselors consciously engage in various behaviors and strategies that minimize impairment and emotional problems, such as burnout and vicarious trauma (Guler & Ceyhan, 2020).
- Literature highlights the benefits of exercise, which can include physiological changes that result in improved levels on mood state, self-esteem, stress, and anxiety/depressive symptoms in the individual (Mikkelsen et al., 2017).
- Exercise can be used as a self-care outlet to combat counselor vicarious traumatization by alleviating professional stress factors, and thus, increasing and sustaining their mental and physical health, and well-being (Coaston & Lawrence, 2019).

A Conceptual Exercise-Based Self-Care Program for Counselors

Novice counselors must draw attention to the importance of engaging in self-care practices regularly to decrease the risk of impairment, burnout, and developing vicarious trauma. If counselors fail to view self-care as a priority in their personal and professional lives, they risk negatively impacting professional functioning, as well as the potential to compromise client welfare (Guler & Ceyhan, 2020). Although counselors have an ethical responsibility to increase and protect their wellness through supervision, consultation, and training, they may not sufficiently concern themselves with their own self-care practices and well-being. Thus, attention must be drawn to the warning signs or impairment and burnout, and evidence suggests exercise can be used as a self-care tool to combat vicarious trauma and alleviate symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress states. To maintain a healthy work-life balance, novice counselors can engage in a programmatic exercise-based self-care routine to reduce levels of stress and anxiety, while mitigating the effects of vicarious trauma in their professional work with clients. Exercise has protective and proactive behavioral effects on mental health professionals and can safeguard against the negative effects of vicarious traumatization, by addressing their emotional responses to their work in a healthy and productive manner.

What is Vicarious Trauma

- Vicarious trauma is:
 - A psychological response that occurs within counselors who empathically engage with clients that have experienced a significant trauma, and in turn, can be negatively impacted by the exposure of pain and suffering from their clients' experiences (Foreman, 2018).
 - Repeated exposure to these traumatic details leave novice counselors more susceptible to developing vicarious trauma. (Cosden et al., 2016; Foreman, 2018)

Implication of Vicarious Trauma in Counselors

Negative signs and effects of vicarious trauma on novice counselors:

- Reduction in empathy toward clients
- Decreased levels of wellness
- Lower job satisfaction
- Greater inclination to leave position
- Rigid beliefs, cynicism, social withdrawal, anxiety, and depression
- Disrupts and alters the counselor's view of their self as competent and trustworthy



Conclusions & Future Implications

- Novice counselors must ensure they regularly engage in self-care practices as part of their ethical obligation to do no harm and be competent in the services they provide.
- Counselors can benefit from incorporating an exercise-based self-care program into their daily routine to minimize effects of vicarious trauma, while enhancing levels of self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Future research can bring awareness and attention to the need for novice counselors to engage in self-care activities, such as exercise, to combat the effects of vicarious trauma on new counselors.
- This research can be of significant value for individuals in other helping professions that may be exposed to similar vicarious trauma experiences seen with counselors. For example, first responders, health care workers, and law enforcement officers may benefit from engaging in an exercise-based self-care regime to combat the negative effects they are exposed to in their professional work life.

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