Counselor Exhaustion and Neurofeedback

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Professional counselors work in a field where they are duty-bound to listen to clients’ stories filled with pain and trauma. Previous researchers note that counselors may experience burnout, compassion fatigue, and/or vicarious trauma due to the nature of their job responsibilities (Goodman, Vesely, Leticq, Clevelend, 2017; Warren, Morgan, Morris, & Morris, 2010; Figley, 1995; Pearlman, Mac Ian, 1995). For the purpose of this examination, vicarious trauma (VT) means the cognitive transformation a counselor goes through when working with clients with trauma. Also, secondary traumatic stress (STS) and compassion fatigue (CF) indicate a counselor is experiencing a decline in caring for self and others. These terms will be used interchangeably throughout this examination of literature. In addition, a focus on *counselor exhaustion* will showcase the physical and emotional fatigue counselors experience when self-care strategies are not implemented. In efforts to treat and heal, Neurofeedback is noted as an evidence-based treatment practice for those experiencing the physiological and psychological effects known to be symptoms of trauma (van der Kolk, B., Hodgdon, H., Gapen, M., Musicaro, R., Suvak, E., Spinazzola, J., 2016). The aim of this literature review is to explore the benefits of Neurofeedback with counselors experiencing STS, CF, VT, burnout, and counselor exhaustion.

**Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Counselor Exhaustion**

Vicarious trauma, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress can lead to *counselor exhaustion*,if not addressed through healthy regimes. McCann and Pearlman (1990) defined VT as the cognitive disruptions experienced by counselors who are exposed to clients’ traumatic experiences. Figley (1997) identified the cost of caring as secondary traumatic stress (STS) and compassion fatigue (CF) (1995, p.7). Burnout is a decrease in concern and esteem for clients (Raquepaw & Miller, 1989). Client concerns are vast and often include emotionally heavy topics. In a single day, a counselor may perform risk assessments for suicide/homicide ideations, report child abuse, hear stories of interpersonal violence, addiction, bullying, systemic oppression, chronic medical/health issues, and/or developmental life’s stages such as death and dying. Trippany, Kress, & Wilcoxon (2004) state that an occupational hazard for counselors is becoming emotionally exhausted. *Counselor exhaustion* is the cumulative effect of working with clients with trauma which interferes with counselor’s ability to provide quality services to their clients (Warren, et al., 2010). To counteract *counselor exhaustion*, a counselor needs to maintain their clinical efficacy and personal well-being (Warren, et al., 2010).

**Neurofeedback as Mindfulness**

According to Warren et al., counselors may experience VT, STS, CF and burnout by failing to recognize and adequately address the negative emotions and thoughts they may unintentionally carry from their work (2010). By prioritizing and attending to self-awareness and self-care, counselors maintain their clinical efficacy and personal well-being (Warren et al., 2010). Mindfulness is a form of self-awareness and self-regulation. Counselors are aware of the benefits and have promoted mindfulness to clients as a self-care strategy. However, mindfulness training protocols are often lengthy, making it challenging to integrate into daily life (Gockel, Burton, James, & Boyer, 2013; 2012). Neurofeedback is similar to mindfulness in that is aids individuals in calming the mind (Gapen, et al., 2016; Gockel, et al., 2013;2012). These practices empower clients to gain control over their own ability to stay attuned in the present moment (Gapen, et al., 2016; Gockel, et al., 2013;2012). Both interventions focus on self-awareness and self-regulation. Neurofeedback is an evidence based treatment that uses electroencephalography (EEG) to train neuronal pathways by regulating brain patterns (deBeus, 2007). Counselors experiencing VT, CF, STS, and burnout will present with irregular brain wave patterns.

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