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ENG 201

Research Introduction

I have been interested in behavioral neuroscience and psychology for many years, as I find cognitive processes and human behavior fascinating. Throughout my studies in high school and at Pace University, I have taken various psychology and STEM courses, reinforcing my belief that psychology is one of the most consequential disciplines we can study. Over time, I have gained a deeper understanding of the study of how human beings think, feel, and behave, as well as the molecular, biological, and cognitive mechanisms that drive these actions. While my coursework has progressed, I have also closely witnessed the mental health challenges faced by my loved ones and those around me and have developed a strong interest in the real-life applications of psychology, particularly how the discipline can be used to improve one's mental health. Mental health is essential at every stage of life, and clinical and counseling psychology provide valuable tools to enhance an individual's well-being. Looking more deeply into the reality I can expect as I pursue a career in psychology, I have been led to explore the challenges professionals in this field face, especially in times of crisis. This has driven me to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on therapists, particularly those in high-demand clinical settings, and its contribution to their burnout. Overall, my studies have deepened my awareness of the complex factors consistently at play within this field and how when cracks begin to show in a time of crisis, there are strategies to look toward as ways of mending and moving forward.

A significant issue that has arrived in recent years in the field of behavioral neuroscience

and psychology is the impact of COVID-19 on mental health professionals, particularly therapists in outpatient clinics and private practices. The pandemic introduced a wide array of challenges that severely affected and increased stressors on individuals' mental health. Due to the high intensity and safety concerns during the pandemic, therapy practices had to shift dramatically, with a forced and sudden transition to virtual platforms. As demand for mental health services surged, professionals had to rapidly adapt to these new technologies while coping with their own pandemic-related stressors, including health concerns, financial uncertainty, and social isolation. The sudden shift to telehealth required most therapists to quickly adjust their practice style. The modification from in-person sessions to virtual most definitely compounded these difficulties, creating a sense of disconnect. Many therapists experienced an overwhelming increase in caseloads, leading to heightened emotional fatigue as well as professional exhaustion. Therapists began working longer hours to meet the needs of their patients, further straining their own well-being. The blurring of work-life boundaries due to remote work further contributed to these challenges, making it increasingly difficult to separate personal and professional responsibilities. In a time of great uncertainty, it was difficult for therapists to help clients navigate their grief and anxiety under these prolonged periods. Institutional support systems often fell short, leaving professionals with limited resources and inadequate structural support.

My research hypothesis explored the correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and therapist burnout, with a particular focus on therapists working in outpatient mental health clinics. This investigation is informed by a review of existing literature on therapist burnout, telehealth adaptation, along with various systemic stressors in the field of mental health. Furthermore, my research will explore the long-term consequences of pandemic-induced burnout, including therapeutic effectiveness, job retention rates, and overall career satisfaction in

the field of psychology. Examining the emotional burden therapists experienced during the pandemic will provide insights into how their work was affected as well as how they maintained emotional resilience in the midst of chaos. Additionally, I aim to investigate potential systemic reforms that could be implemented to help support professionals and mitigate burnout. This could include improved workload management strategies and access to better mental health resources for therapists themselves. Through the identification and application of these elements we can enhance the sustainability of the profession in the face of future crises while ensuring the best healthcare is provided for patients; and, through my research and interviews with mental health professionals working in outpatient settings, I hope to contribute to the conversation surrounding therapist burnout. Some of my key research questions include: How has the shift to telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic altered therapists' professional identity and sense of connection with clients in outpatient clinics? What specific shortcomings during the pandemic most significantly impacted therapists' job satisfaction and career longevity? How did professional isolation contribute to therapist burnout, and how did its effects compare to other stressors such as financial insecurity or increased caseloads? What long-term psychological effects has pandemic-induced burnout had on therapists in outpatients settings, and how do these effects influence their ability to provide care post-pandemic? Through further narrowing my focus on outpatient therapists and grounding my questions in existing literature, I can ensure that my research remains relevant, specific, and informed by scholarly discourse.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research design, exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on therapist burnout. This approach was chosen to capture the firsthand experiences of mental health professionals who navigated the challenges introduced by the

pandemic. Interviews were conducted using pre-selected questions with three licensed therapists. Participants were selected based on their direct experience with the pandemic's effects and a minimum of 2-3 years of mental health work, exploring a nuanced exploration of burnout in this context. This study relies on peer-reviewed articles from various databases to provide context and support for findings. Each interview took place on zoom and to ensure accurate documentation an online voice recorder (voice memos) was used during the interviews to obtain a transcript. Each interview took about 16 minutes. My interviewees are Ali Solgi, Christine Crawley, and Heath Bannard. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes and shared experiences, which were then compared against findings from the academic literature. This analysis enabled a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of therapists and provided qualitative data to support or challenge existing research on pandemic-related burnout.

All three therapists were asked the same set of questions concerning burnout following the COVID-19 pandemic. The question are as follows:

1. How significant do you believe burnout is within the field of psychology, and how have your personal or professional experiences influenced that perspective?

Follow-up: What do you see as the most common contributors to burnout, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

2.How would you describe the level of institutional support available to mental health professionals in preventing or managing burnout post COVID?

Follow-up: Did you observe any changes in support systems during the pandemic, and how were those measures helpful or lacking?

3.Can you recall a time when you personally experienced burnout in your work?

Follow-up: How did it affect your ability to provide care, conduct research, or engage with clients—and what did you take away from that experience?

4.What factors during the COVID-19 pandemic do you think most significantly contributed to increased burnout among mental health professionals?

Follow-up: Were there any stressors that emerged or intensified during that period that hadn't been as prominent before?

5.How do you typically recognize the signs of burnout in yourself or colleagues?

6.What strategies do you believe are most effective for psychologists to maintain their own mental health while meeting the demands of their profession?

Literature Review

Introduction

In writings on the COVID-19 pandemic's significant and unprecedented challenges for mental health professionals, two critical themes emerge from the literature on therapist burnout during and after the pandemic: the burden of increased workload and emotional exhaustion and the transition to teletherapy and its professional and physiological demands. Examining these issues offers insight into the factors that contributed to burnout while highlighting the systemic changes needed to support mental health professionals in the field.

Theme 1: Increased Workload and Exhaustion

Therapists' Resilience and Post traumatic Growth during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rather than emphasizing negative outcomes, Aafjes-van Doorn, Katie, et al. (2021) examine how therapists navigated the psychological and professional challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on resilience and posttraumatic growth. While many studies highlight therapist burnout and emotional exhaustion, this research offers a different perspective by identifying factors that contributed to growth, adaptation, and professional development despite adversity. The authors explore how therapists coped with increased workload, teletherapy challenges, and emotional strain while also finding opportunities for skill enhancement and deeper professional fulfillment. By shifting the focus from burnout to resilience, these findings broaden the discussion on therapist well-being, providing insights into protective factors that may help mitigate long-term stress in the field. Its findings contribute to research on therapist burnout by illustrating how both vulnerability and resilience shaped the professional landscape during and after the pandemic.

Trauma-Informed Supervision and Related Predictors of Burnout

In contrast, Cook and Fye (2022) focus on the adverse effects of insufficient trauma-informed supervision and how it influences burnout and secondary traumatic stress among pre-licensed counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors identify increased workload, emotional exhaustion, and lack of supportive supervision as major contributors to burnout. Additionally, they highlight the professional challenges posed by the abrupt transition to teletherapy, including difficulties in maintaining therapeutic boundaries and adapting to digital platforms. Their findings suggest that trauma-informed supervision—centered on empathy and clinician well-being—can serve as a protective factor against professional exhaustion. This

research is particularly relevant to understanding how the pandemic heightened stressors for new therapists and what systemic changes may help prevent long-term burnout in the field.

The Role of Peer Consultation in Mitigating Burnout

Adding another layer to this theme, Miu et al. (2022) explore the critical role of peer consultation in mitigating burnout and professional isolation among psychologists, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors argue that peer consultation—regular meetings among colleagues to discuss clinical challenges, share strategies, and provide emotional support—is essential for maintaining professional well-being. The study highlights how the pandemic exacerbated therapists' stress through increased workloads, emotional exhaustion, and the shift to teletherapy, making peer consultation an even more valuable resource. Unlike other studies that focus solely on the causes of burnout, this article provides a potential solution by emphasizing how collaborative support networks can enhance resilience and job satisfaction. Its findings contribute to the research by identifying peer consultation as a structural intervention that could help sustain therapists' mental health beyond the pandemic.

Theme 2: Transition to Teletherapy and Its Professional Challenges

Psychotherapists' Challenges with Online Therapy during COVID-19

The shift to online therapy changed the way therapists connected with clients-sometimes for the worst. Békés et al. (2021) examine psychotherapists' concerns about online therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly regarding their ability to maintain therapeutic connectedness with clients. The findings indicate that therapists who struggled with fostering emotional engagement in teletherapy were more likely to view it as less effective over time,

contributing to professional dissatisfaction and burnout. Unlike research that focuses solely on workload or emotional exhaustion, this study highlights how the nature of remote therapy itself became a source of stress. By demonstrating how perceived barriers to therapeutic rapport in online sessions impact therapists' well-being, this article provides additional support for understanding the psychological toll of the transition to teletherapy and its role in post-pandemic burnout.

Burnout and Psychological Well-being among Psychotherapists

Van Hoy and Rzeszutek (2022) highlight how teletherapy reshaped the daily realities of therapeutic work, bringing a unique set of stressors that extended beyond the typical challenges of in-person sessions. Rather than simply being a convenient alternative, remote therapy introduced digital fatigue, constant screen time, and blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Many therapists found it difficult to stay fully engaged without the nonverbal cues and natural pauses that come with in-person interaction. The shift also brought new logistical issues—managing technology, ensuring privacy, and adapting therapeutic techniques to a virtual setting—all of which added to the emotional labor. The authors emphasize that without structural changes like manageable caseloads, tech support, and clearer expectations around availability, teletherapy risks becoming an ongoing source of burnout. Their work pushes the conversation beyond individual coping, calling attention to the systemic adjustments needed to make teletherapy sustainable.

Burnout in Professional Psychotherapists: Relationships with Self-Compassion, Work–Life Balance, and Telepressure

In the context of the shift to telehealth, Kotera et al. (2021) explore the complex dynamics contributing to burnout among psychotherapists, with a particular focus on self-compassion, work–

life balance, and telepressure. This transition has introduced new stressors, such as telepressure—the pressure to respond quickly to messages and manage an increased workload. This phenomenon, combined with challenges like "Zoom fatigue" and the need for therapists to support clients in adapting to virtual therapy, has heightened the risk of burnout. Kotera et al. discuss how the increased reliance on technology for delivering psychotherapy, particularly from home, can blur the boundaries between work and personal life, leading to greater workload pressures. This research underscores the need for systemic support to ensure psychotherapists can continue to provide essential mental health services without compromising their own well-being.

Conclusion

Taken together, the six studies reviewed highlight the multifaceted nature of therapist burnout during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The first set of articles demonstrates how increased workload and emotional exhaustion significantly contributed to burnout, while the second set of articles emphasizes the professional challenges of transitioning to teletherapy. Together, these sources provide a broader understanding of the unique stressors therapists faced and offer potential interventions, such as trauma-informed supervision and peer consultation, to mitigate burnout in the future. By examining these themes, my research aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on therapist well-being, shedding light on necessary systemic changes to improve professional sustainability in mental health care.

Results

Three central themes emerged consistently across the interviews: emotional exhaustion, the impact of the shift to telehealth, and the difficulty of maintaining boundaries in high-stress

environments. These patterns align closely with my research hypothesis, which explores how the COVID-19 pandemic intensified burnout in mental health professionals primarily through sustained emotional burden and abrupt structural changes in care delivery. While each participant brought a unique lens to their experience, their reflections collectively emphasize how the pandemic's emotional and logistical strain affected their mental health and professional well-being.

Emotional exhaustion was the most deeply felt and widely shared experience. Christine, who worked in both community mental health and crisis response, described becoming physically unwell during the pandemic due to the intensity of her workload and her own compromised immune system. She said, "It was difficult managing my own anxiety and practicing self-care while supporting others," especially as she treated clients navigating grief, fear, and political unrest. She also recalled a situation involving a client whose aggressive behavior left her feeling unsafe and unsupported, noting that it led to a crisis of confidence in which she questioned whether she should remain in the field. Similarly, Ali reflected on how he felt "completely drained" by the end of each day and wrestled with the emotional toll of not being able to do more for his clients. Heath shared that the sessions "started to feel like they were stacking up emotionally," which eventually led to a sense of disengagement during client work. Together, these accounts highlight how cumulative stress—amplified by the pandemic—contributed to a widespread sense of emotional fatigue.

The shift to telehealth emerged as a second major theme that contributed to burnout in subtle but powerful ways. While it enabled continuity of care during lockdowns, it also blurred the line between work and personal life, limited in-person connection, and made it harder to process emotionally intense sessions. Christine described feeling isolated and overwhelmed while working

remotely: "I struggled to keep up with paperwork, and I couldn't set boundaries with clients." Without a physical separation between home and work, it became more difficult to decompress. Ali shared that telehealth disrupted his ability to mentally "leave" work at the end of the day, noting that home no longer felt like a sanctuary. Heath added that virtual care made him feel "less in tune" with his clients due to the absence of nonverbal cues and the energy of face-to-face interaction. Although telehealth was a necessary adaptation, the emotional toll of remote care delivery became increasingly apparent over time.

A third theme that emerged was the challenge of maintaining boundaries and self-care, particularly in demanding or crisis-oriented settings. Christine described the high expectations placed on mental health workers in community care, such as managing large caseloads, completing extensive documentation, and navigating court responsibilities. These pressures, she explained, made it difficult to preserve time for recovery. Ali acknowledged that although he was trained in self-care strategies, he found them harder to apply under sustained stress: "The usual things I did to reset just weren't cutting it anymore." Heath shared that he often skipped breaks or forgot meals between sessions, not out of neglect, but because the pace of work left little room for pause. These insights reflect the subtle ways that even knowledgeable and experienced professionals found it difficult to prioritize their own needs while responding to the needs of others. While the interview data strongly supports the idea that emotional burden and telehealth changes contributed to increased burnout, there were also nuances that complicated the hypothesis. Heath noted that at the beginning of the pandemic, telehealth improved accessibility for some of his clients and allowed for more scheduling flexibility. Ali mentioned that remote work gave him more time at home, which initially helped him feel more grounded. These experiences suggest that while telehealth increased emotional labor in many cases, its impact was not universally negative, but

varied based on context and work environment. Still, the long-term effect appeared to trend toward fatigue and disengagement rather than sustained resilience.

Conclusions

This research confirms that burnout among mental health professionals was significantly intensified by the emotional demands of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden shift to remote care. Interviewees consistently described emotional exhaustion, the challenges of telehealth, and blurred personal-professional boundaries as major contributors to their professional strain. These findings support the research hypothesis and align with existing literature highlighting how crisis conditions, vicarious trauma, and a disruption in the status quo changed therapists' ability to sustain their mental health. From both the interviews and the articles, it's clear that burnout is more than just overwork—it's the slow decline of emotional energy in the face of continuous, high-stakes care. The pandemic didn't create this issue, but it exposed and intensified longstanding challenges in the mental health field. While institutional support and systemic underfunding were noted, participants framed these more as contributing factors rather than the central cause of burnout. This research also opens the door for further exploration. Future studies could examine whether different types of telehealth platforms affect burnout differently, or how support strategies—like structured boundary-setting, trauma-informed supervision, or protected time off— might help buffer emotional fatigue. Investigating long-term outcomes, such as career retention or job satisfaction among those who experienced high burnout during the pandemic, could also offer valuable insights. Overall, the findings suggest that supporting the emotional well-being of mental health professionals must become a more intentional and prioritized part of the field moving forward.

Reflection

Throughout this project, I've grown a lot, not just in terms of writing and research skills, but also in how I understand the real-world impact of psychological issues. Focusing on therapist burnout after COVID-19 gave me the chance to connect academic learning with real human experiences. Talking directly with therapists made the topic so much more personal and meaningful. Hearing about how their work and emotional well-being were affected by the pandemic really opened my eyes to the emotional weight these professionals carry. These conversations gave me a deeper understanding of how stress can build up in crisis situations and how that affects both the professionals and the people they care for.

The peer review process was also a huge part of my progress. Getting thoughtful feedback from classmates helped me view my own work differently. It pushed me to revise for clarity, avoid opinionated or vague statements, and really focus on being specific. It also showed me where my arguments or organization weren't as strong as they could be. Being able to identify and fix these areas made my final paper much stronger and helped me become a better, more thoughtful writer. A shift happened when I decided to narrow my topic. At first, I planned to look at burnout among all mental health professionals, but I realized that narrowing it down to therapists dealing with post-COVID burnout gave my work more direction and depth. That change helped me focus my argument and connect everything more clearly to one issue. I learned how important it is to stay flexible during research, and how refining your question can make a big difference in the quality of your work.

The course materials, like the OER readings and the literature review tutorial, were also super helpful. They showed me how to properly find and use scholarly sources, which made my writing more credible, and evidence based. These tools gave me a stronger foundation for academic

research and helped me stay away from generalizations or unsupported ideas. Overall, this project has helped me grow not just as a student, but as someone genuinely interested in psychology. It made me realize how important it is to connect research to real people and real stories. I'm also thankful that this assignment held me accountable for reaching out to mental health professionals. A couple of the interviews gave me amazing insight—not only for my paper, but for my future. Some of the therapists shared advice on how to pursue a career in psychology, and their encouragement gave me a clearer sense of direction. This project helped me build connections and gave me a deeper appreciation for the field I want to go into.

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