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Compassion fatigue, level of exposure, empathy and affect intensity amongst employee assistance programme counsellor

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ABSTRACT

High levels of trauma within the South African society affect the majority of the population either directly or indirectly. In order to assist individuals overcome such traumatic incidents, many companies in South Africa have contracted with Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Providers to provide counselling to employees. These EAP counsellors are often the first mental health professionals to be exposed to a client's traumatic story. Consequently, such counsellors may be vulnerable to compassion fatigue (CF). The consequences of EAP counsellors working with traumatised clients have been relatively unexplored. Therefore, this study proposed that EAP trauma counsellors are vulnerable within their scope of work and are an important group of professionals to be further investigated. Furthermore, leading authors in the field of trauma argue that both individual characteristics and environmental factors play a role in the development of CF. However, research into the process by which CF develops is extremely limited. Hence, this study attempted to explore this process through identifying possible core variables such as level of exposure, empathy and affect intensity and exploring their link to CF. The study was based on Figley's (1995) Trauma Transmission Model, Dutton and Rubinstein's (1995) Ecological Model and McRitchie's (2006) Refined Model for Trauma Workers. The data was collected from 60 EAP counsellors, through self report measures. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, correlations, a stepwise regression, two independent sample t-tests, and analysis of variance. Results revealed that 28.34% of the sample fell within the range for CF. There were significant correlations between Level of Exposure to traumatic material and CF; between levels of empathy and CF and between Affect Intensity and Empathy. There was no significant correlation between Affect Intensity and CF. Furthermore, the stepwise regression indicated that 56% of CF may be explained by a combination of four interacting variables, that is, Level of Exposure, Fantasy, Personal Distress and Perspective Taking.