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Exploring child welfare social workers' experiences of secondary traumatic stress

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ABSTRACT

Social workers are exposed to trauma in their line of duty when assisting clients. While it is widely acknowledged that providing services to traumatised children may negatively impact the mental health of social workers. Little is known about the effects of exposure to traumatised clients and social workers employed at Child Welfare in South Africa, Gauteng region experiences of secondary traumatic stress. As such, the aim of the study was to explore the experiences of these social workers with regards to the effects of secondary traumatic stress. The study utilised a qualitative research approach to obtain an in-depth understanding on how secondary traumatic stress affected these social workers both personally and professionally. Through the adoption of a qualitative design and the use of a semi-structured interview schedule, ten social workers were interviewed through face-to -face and virtual platforms. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Dutton and Rubenstein's (1995) Model of Secondary Traumatic Stress was adopted as the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The findings indicated that child welfare social workers experienced secondary traumatic stress, due to the constant exposure of child abuse cases. Their experiences were explored as well as their coping strategies in dealing with secondary traumatic stress. The findings will hopefully contribute to the knowledge in this area and highlight the importance of personal and organisational coping strategies that will help child welfare social workers to cope with the trauma they experience from their work.

KEY WORDS

Burnout, Child welfare organisations, Coping, Occupational stress, Secondary traumatic stress, Social workers, Supervision and Vicarious trauma.