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The Efficacy of a Collaborative Stress Management Program for Teachers

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Research indicates teachers suffer from stress and burnout in numbers greater than those in similar professions (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). This is particularly important since poor student behavior and performance may be the unintended consequences (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). If supported by research, school-based stress management programs may provide a method for reducing teacher burnout and improving school and classroom environments. This article describes an experimental study that evaluated the impact of a school-based and collaboratively implemented stress management program on teachers' emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment perceptions.

The program evaluated in this study was the RIS (relaxation, imagery, solution) program, which was named for the basic program components: relaxation, use of guided imagery, solution-focused imagery, and solution-focused classroom techniques. This program helped teachers relax and think more positively about students, personal goals, and accomplishments. While in a state of relaxation, teachers were asked by community counselors to imagine themselves in a peaceful environment. Once in this imaginary environment, teachers were asked to mentally and silently state solution-focused compliments and finally, scale, find exceptions, and visualize accomplishments. After the completion of the aforementioned intervention, school counselors assisted teachers in applying solution-focused techniques such as complimenting and exception finding with students in the classroom.

Relevant Trends

Burnout gradually develops as the unintended consequence of prolonged stress levels. This feeling of physical exhaustion (emotional exhaustion), negative feelings and reactions (depersonalization), and poor self evaluations (personal accomplishment)

develops gradually through three consecutive stages. An imbalance between needs and resources (stage one) is followed by low energy, tension, exhaustion, and physical ailments during stage two. The third stage becomes evident when attitudes and behavior become negative and cynical (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Slaavik & Slaavik, 2007). Burnout results in lowered motivation levels (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006), decreased teacher attrition (Hall, Pearson, & Carroll, 1992), increased student behavior problems, and poor relationships with peers, administrators, and parents (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007).

Three levels of burnout are often evidenced by teaching professionals: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Emotional exhaustion is defined as feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. Depersonalization describes an unfeeling and impersonal response toward students while personal accomplishment burnout is described as feelings of incompetence and low work achievement.

Treatment Rationale and Ethical Considerations

The RIS program was based on several theoretical approaches: cognitive and behaviorally based techniques based on Benson and Klipper's (1975) relaxation response and guided imagery, Bandura's social learning theory (via teacher modeling for students; Bandura, 1997), and solution-focused brief therapy techniques (de Shazer, 1988). Each component will be described as contained in the treatment below.

Benson's (1975) relaxation response is a state of deep rest that has been shown to change physical and emotional responses to stress. Findings suggest that the relaxation response lowers blood pressure, oxygen intake, stress and burnout, and muscle tension (Benson & Klipper, 1975; Dusek et al., 2008; Esch, Fricchione, & Stefano, 2003). The relaxation response has been linked to improved health and has been used in a variety of settings (Benson, 1981; Benson, 1982; Goodale, Domar, & Benson, 1990; Hoffman et al., 1982).

A second technique utilized in the RIS Program is guided imagery. This method consists of mentally visualizing a peaceful, relaxing, and beautiful place. As such, the individual controls the ability to temporarily place themselves in a stress free, relaxing, and therapeutic environment (McElligott, Siemers, Thomas, & Kohn, 2009; Palmer & Puri, 2006; Smith, 2005).

Bandura's (1997) social learning theory states that individuals learn as a result of self-efficacy, modeling, and replication. The treatment intends to promote self-efficacy as participants visualize themselves performing without flaw. As such, participants experience a sense of control over their environment. Further, modeling by counselors and other participants simplifies the relaxation process and imbeds social learning theory into the treatment.

De Shazer's (1988) solution-focused premise believes individuals are creators of their own reality. Further, specific techniques in this theory elicit feelings of strength, self-efficacy, and success. Solution-focused techniques utilized in the treatment included complimenting and the miracle question as applied during relaxation. Complimenting intends to point out strengths that enable teachers to carry better behaviors into the realistic environment (de Shazer, 1988). The miracle question was transformed into

imagery by asking teachers to imagine a perfect world. Finally, concepts based on the relaxation experience, complimenting, and the miracle question were processed at the end of the session.

The private non-disclosing nature of this mentally based strategy allowed teachers to participate in the group program without fear of retribution. Thus, the program was easily implemented, ethically feasible, and effective for teachers in the school setting. Further, when implementing treatment for teachers, the school counselor acted as program consultant rather than counselor. The community counselor conducted actual treatment for teachers, allowing the school counselor to ethically maintain appropriate boundaries with co-workers.

Purpose of This Study

The researchers investigated the impact of a school-based stress management program focusing on the reduction of teacher burnout. It was hypothesized that teachers involved in a stress management program involving a combination of relaxation, imagery, and solution-focused techniques would experience less burnout via decreased depersonalization and emotional exhaustion and increased perceptions of personal accomplishment. These hypotheses were examined using multivariate analysis of covariance.

Method

Participants and Setting

Eighty-five teachers employed in two middle schools in the panhandle of Texas participated in this Institutional Review Board approved study. Of these teachers, 44 participated in the treatment group and 41 were in the control group. Of those in the treatment group, 34 were female and 10 were male. The control group consisted of 30 female teachers and 11 male professionals. Fifty of the teachers indicated teaching experience as 15 years or more (26 from the treatment group and 24 from the control group). Thirteen of the teachers in the treatment group and 10 in the control group stated they had taught between 5 and 14 years. The five remaining teachers in the treatment group and seven teachers in the control group indicated less than five years teaching experience. Forty of the treatment group participants and thirty-nine of the control group participants identified themselves as Caucasian, while all remaining participants stated they were Hispanic American. All of the teachers worked within two middle schools, one enrolling approximately 900 students with 60% of the student body qualifying for free or reduced lunch and the other enrolling 800 students with 73% of the student body qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Each school represented a different school district within the same regional area.

Participants from each school volunteered for random selection into either the treatment or control group. Twenty-two of the treatment group participants and 20 of the control group participants were randomly selected from the school enrolling 900 students. Remaining participants were randomly placed into the two groups (22 into treatment group and 21 into control group) from the school enrolling 800 students.

Instruments

The Maslach Burnout Inventory was administered to each participating teacher (control and treatment) prior to and after treatment and was used to measure teacher burnout using three subscales as dependent variables. The first subscale embedded within the Maslach Burnout Inventory is the emotional exhaustion scale. This subscale measures feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. The second subscale included is entitled depersonalization. Depersonalization measures an unfeeling and impersonal response toward students. Higher scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales indicate more severe feelings of burnout. The final subscale, personal accomplishment, measures feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work. Lower scores on the personal accomplishment subscales indicate high levels of burnout (Maslach et al, 1996).

Overall, the Maslach Burnout Inventory consists of 22 questions, takes 10 to 15 minutes to complete, and has adequate reliability and validity. Reliability coefficients and test-retest data indicate the following correlations respectively: .90 and .82 for the emotional exhaustion subscale, .79 and .60 for depersonalization, and .71 and .80 for personal accomplishment. Convergent validity was demonstrated by comparing scores with reports from spouses or co-workers (Maslach et al., 1996).

Research Design

A pre-post control group design was utilized with subjects randomly selected and assigned to groups. Dependent variables were scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Pre-tests were used as covariates to equalize existing differences that might be present between groups. The relationship between the independent variable (participation in the RIS program) and the dependent variables was tested using multivariate analysis of covariance.

Procedure

Participants were randomly selected and placed into two groups, treatment and control. Approximately half of the participants in each group were drawn from each of the two middle schools in the panhandle of Texas. First, participants within each school met together and completed a pretest. Next, a treatment consisting of three weekly sessions was given to treatment group participants during their scheduled planning time. Following the treatment, all participants (control and experimental) were given the posttest.

Several factors were implemented to ensure anonymity of participants and offer treatment to all involved. Participants did not put names on pre and posttests. Rather they used a self created passwords allowing pre and posttests to be correlated for each individual. Counselors and other school personnel did not have access to individual results as they were given directly to the researchers. Finally, the control group was not exposed to treatment during the study but was offered the treatment after the study concluded.

RIS Treatment

Relaxation, imagery, and solution-focused therapy were combined into a unique stress and burnout treatment requiring collaborative efforts between school and community counseling professionals. For ethical reasons, school counselors did not counsel teachers. Rather, these professionals served as facilitators and advocates for the program. School counselors scheduled sessions, advocated for, and facilitated sessions, and community counselors conducted the actual sessions. Each of the three total sessions began with community counselors ensuring teachers were in comfortable positions. Many teachers positioned themselves on the floor while others chose to remain seated. Once all participants were comfortably in place, lights were dimmed and the session began. The counselor started the session by saying, "I want you to take a deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. As you exhale, say to yourself, I am relaxed." The counselor allowed time for teachers to breathe and self talk. Next, the counselor made statements intended to assist individuals in relaxing. Participating teachers slowly relaxed via statements made concerning one body section at a time. For example, the counselor said, "Your head is feeling very heavy as you begin to become as relaxed as you wish to be" and "your neck and shoulders feel very heavy and warm, so heavy you wouldn't want to lift them if you had to." Statements intended to elicit relaxation continued until it appeared all were relaxed from head to toe.

Once teachers were in a state of relaxation, creative imagery and solution-focused techniques were implemented. Teachers were asked to visualize a relaxing or peaceful place. For example, individuals might picture themselves on the beach, floating on a cloud, lying in a hammock under a tree, or perhaps under a dark starlit sky accompanied by soft music. This individualistic intervention allowed participants to place themselves within any personally comforting environment. To assist clients in arriving at this level of creative imagery, the counselor said, "Picture a place that is peaceful and fulfilling; a place where no worries exist and no boundaries or limitations are around. Your place is beautiful and contains no stressors." The counselor alternated imagery and relaxation suggestions with those requesting deep breathing. The counselor said, "Take a deep breath in, filling your lungs completely as you say to yourself, 'I am relaxed. Nothing matters. This time is for me. I am in my beautiful place.'" After approximately 5 minutes using creative imagery, the counselor made solution-focused statements aimed at changing client perceptions from a negative to a positive connotation. As based on the miracle question, the counselor asked teachers to focus on times when things would be better. For example, the counselor said, "In your mind, visualize yourself as your problems are gone. Things are perfect and no problems exist. Picture how this feels and how you are now different." The counselor also applied complimenting techniques by stating, "You are a strong person; strong and important enough to take this time for you. Think of your many strengths and everything going well for you. Mentally list your strong characteristics."

After approximately 25 minutes, the counselor slowly moved clients visually from their imagined place back into the real world environment. The counselor said, "You must leave your stress free place for now but you are content because you can come back anytime you choose. As you stop, you look around and begin to walk away from your beautiful place." The counselor assisted teachers as they imagined themselves moving slowly away from their perfect place, back to the school building, into reality.

Finally, the counselor asked teachers to slowly open their eyes as they heard this professional counting backwards from 10 to 1.

Following this session, teachers were asked to process the experience. The counselor asked teachers to list strengths and specific ways a perfect world was different during imagery. Teachers were allowed the opportunity to discuss their thoughts aloud concerning the aforementioned ideas as well as perspectives of the treatment. After the third session, a posttest was given to all treatment participants.

Results

This study examined the effects of an intervention incorporating the relaxation response, guided imagery, and solution-focused brief therapy on teacher emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. To determine significance, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted using pretests as a covariate, group membership as the factor variable, and scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory subscales as dependent variables. The MANCOVA revealed a significant interaction of group $F(1,83) = 66.99$ (as measured by an alpha level of .05) on the combined dependent variables ($p = .0001$). Univariate statistics were run as a follow-up to determine which of the three dependent variables were significantly related to group participation. Significance was found between treatment and control groups on emotional exhaustion $F(1,80) = 12.51$, $p = .001$; personal accomplishment $F(1,80) = 23.85$, $p = .0001$; and depersonalization $F(1,80) = 31.01$, $p = .0001$. Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scores for the treatment group were significantly lower than those for the control group. At the same time, personal accomplishment scores were significantly higher for treatment group participants than for control group participants.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to determine the outcome of a counseling intervention on teacher burnout levels; specifically emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Results indicate that participation in the intervention was associated with decreased burnout levels on all three subscales. Lower emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scores and higher personal accomplishment scores for the treatment group as compared to the control group indicated an improvement in burnout levels. As a result, the study implies the importance of offering stress management within the school setting and offers credence to Benson's (1981) contention that stress management reduces burnout and improves quality of life. In short, this program can make a difference in burnout levels among participating teachers. Further, it promotes the efficacy of solution-focused techniques as infused in guided imagery and relaxation.

Several limitations are evident in this study. First, the study was limited to include only two middle schools within the same region. As a result, findings may not be generalizable to other populations. Further, the intervention consisted of only three weekly one-hour sessions. Additional studies might seek to include longer treatments as well as participants teaching a variety of grade levels. It would be interesting to uncover student reactions of reduced teacher stress in future studies.

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