Exploring School Counselors’ Perceptions of Vicarious Trauma: A Qualitative Study

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The purpose of this study was to examine school counselors’ knowledge and perceptions of vicarious trauma (VT). A qualitative interviewing methodology, consensual qualitative research (CQR), was used. Six school counselors, ranging in age from 27 to 54, were recruited from schools located in a Midwestern state (3 females and 3 males). Participants worked at least part-time with 3 to 14 years of counseling experience. Four of the six participants graduated from a master’s degree program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. Participants had a range of other counseling experiences including mental health and social work.

Three primary domains (themes) emerged from the data: (a) ambiguous VT; (b) support system significance, and (c) importance of level of experience. The results indicate that in general, participants had an idea of what VT entailed, but for the most part it was ambiguously defined. School counselors reported that support systems are significant and needed to help alleviate VT symptoms, or prevent it from occurring. Participants agreed that level of experience determined counselors’ risks of experiencing VT. This experience was perceived in a number of different ways ranging from formal training to work/life experience with all participants mentioning how either life or work experiences helped them avoid or overcome VT.

The findings suggest school counselors feel they lack adequate knowledge and training regarding VT. Findings from this study also suggest that it would be useful for counselors, especially those working with trauma survivors, to gain knowledge and awareness on the topic. Counselor educators should offer more training in their counseling programs to increase awareness of VT and other trauma related topics. Furthermore, courses related to trauma may be useful for fostering counselor growth. Supervision also can be perceived as a reliable source for providing information on VT.

The counselors in this study expressed the need for support in their work environments. School counselors should maintain collegial relationships as well as offer support to peers within their work environments. School counselors are in a good position to initiate support for students in their learning environments. Likewise, their work with these students is crucial, making adequate training in VT essential for their future careers.