

Professional Quality of Life: An Assessment of Compassion Fatigue and Self-Care among RDNs

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OBJECTIVE

- To assess registered dietitian nutritionist's (RDNs') awareness and current level of compassion fatigue (CF) and identify their current self-care practices using an online survey and virtual mini focus groups.

BACKGROUND

- Compassion fatigue (CF) is a combination of burnout and secondary traumatic stress (STS)
- CF is commonly experienced in helping professions due to high pressure/ relational nature of the work environments
- CF is well-studied among nurses, social workers
- CF is associated with negative physical, psychological, and professional consequences
- Self-care practices are inversely associated with CF, and self-care interventions have shown promise to decrease levels of CF among helping professionals
- CF and self-care are not well studied in RDNs

METHODOLOGY

- Mixed methods study among IAND members
- Survey
 - Recruitment: Online survey link sent to IAND membership
 - Design: Online survey conducted via Qualtrics; survey included demographic and workplace questions, awareness and perception questions, Mindful Self-Care Scale (MSCS) – Standard (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018), Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) Scale (Stamm, 2010)
- Focus Groups
 - Recruitment: Participants recruited from survey
 - Design: Mini virtual focus groups hosted via Zoom
 - Analysis: Braun & Clark (2006) method for thematic analysis conducted by three researchers

RESULTS

- 96 valid survey responses (97.9% female; 41.7 ± 15.6 years of age; 17.2 ± 15.1 years of practice; median of 5 RDNs at workplace)
- 49% had previously heard of CF
 - Via workplace: 20.8%
 - Professional development: 11.5%
 - Postsecondary education: 1%
 - Dietetic internship: 0%
- After reading a definition of CF... 41.7% believed they were currently experiencing it ... 64.6% believed they had previously experienced it
- 97.9% had previously heard of self-care
 - Via workplace: 66.7%
 - Professional development: 45.8%
 - Postsecondary education: 30.1%
 - Dietetic internship: 17.7%

RDNs in the Sample		Interpretation of ProQOL Scores		Risks for CF (r)	
Compassion Satisfaction	Moderate (39.3 ± 6.6)	Low	<22	Compassion Satisfaction (t-score)	Burnout (t-score)
Burnout	Moderate (22.8 ± 6.9)	Moderate	23-41	Age	0.368**
STS	Low (21.5 ± 5.8)	High	>42	Yrs of Practice	0.399**
				** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)	

- MSCS – Standard total score correlations with ProQOL subscales:
 - Compassion satisfaction: $r = 0.700^{**}$; Burnout: $r = -0.717^{**}$; and STS: $r = -0.348^{**}$

Mindful Self-Care Scale Domains From Most to Least Common			Effects of COVID-19 on Professional Wellbeing	
Self-Care Domain	Mean	SD		
Supportive Relationships	3.98	0.86	1 Heightened stress at work	64.2%
Supportive Structure	3.57	0.89	2 Created additional responsibilities	55.8%
Self-Compassion & Purpose	3.28	0.88	3 Increased emotional exhaustion	54.7%
Mindful Awareness	3.23	0.98	4 Remote work/ work from home	54.7%
Physical Care	3.08	0.78	5 Decreased work-life balance	41.1%
Mindful Relaxation	2.95	0.78	6 Exposure to people with COVID-19	41.1%
			7 Difficulty with normal productivity/ workload	35.8%
			8 Difficulty maintaining focus	34.7%
			9 Increased sense of purpose	34.7%
			10 Increased physical exhaustion	32.6%

- Mini virtual focus groups: Group A: $n = 3$; Group B: $n = 2$

Theme	Example Quote
Impact of learning about concept of CF	"I was glad that they were having the classes for the staff, because some of the staff are right next to that sort of thing, you know, working a lot of long shifts, extra days, shorthanded and then dealing with all the very sick people, new diagnoses, deaths."
Reasons RDNs/ students should learn about CF	"Just being able to kind of name it [CF] and recognize it and... knowing that you're not the only one feeling that way and that you can rely on your peers and colleagues and hopefully talk about it more openly and hopefully with just learning about what compassion fatigue is, hopefully there would be some kind of like further, you know, what to do about it and healthy ways to deal with that and cope with it."
Purpose of self-care	"things that are solely for the purpose of filling your bucket, reinvigorating you, just taking care of you"
How COVID-19 has affected one's relationship to self-care	"I think after the pandemic's over, if we ever go back to a "normal" of some kind, I hope I don't forget all the work I did to try to do self-care, because if it's important now, it's important normally."
Effect of workplace factors on employee self-care	"For example, most dietitians feel very responsible for their floors and coming to work and all that sort of thing, and so like we had somebody's husband die...two weeks of funeral leave...that wasn't really enough. We all divided up an extra set of two weeks and we sent it to her and said, if you want, we're completely willing to cover you for two more weeks and this is our plan. Everyone's participating."

DISCUSSION

- As hypothesized, higher levels of professional wellbeing than other studied helping professions
- Different risk factors than expected (e.g., longer time in field was inversely correlated with CF)
- Nonetheless, findings suggest CF should be addressed in RDNs (see % perceived experience)
- Respondents' definitions of CF and self-care captured key characteristics from the literature
- As hypothesized, self-care was strongly and significantly correlated with decreased burnout and increased compassion satisfaction
- Key differences between two mini focus groups
- Limitations: Relatively small convenience sample (pilot work, not generalizable), qualitative findings did not reach saturation due limited number of mini focus groups

CONCLUSION

- Greater prior awareness of self-care than CF, with workplace as most common source of information
- Higher professional quality of life than other helping professions with younger age and less time in field as risk factors
- Various self-care practices (those from Supportive Structure and Relationships most common)
- Self-care correlated with increased compassion satisfaction and decreased burnout
- Focus groups perceived RDNs as at risk for CF; expressed importance of raising awareness

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Assess levels of CF in larger sample of RDNs
- Reassess outside of COVID-19 and reflect
- Larger focus groups, potential for developing RDN-specific interventions against CF
- Teach dietetics students/ professionals about CF and self-care to promote professional wellbeing
- Address problem at the systems level, esp. post COVID-19