

Reducing Burnout For End-of-Life Care Workers: Art Therapy Based Supervision

Abstract

Care of the dying and the bereaved can be a psychological, emotional, and spiritual burden to professional caregivers that can lead to compassion fatigue or burnout (Swetz, Harrington, Matsuyama, Shanafelt & Lyckholm, 2009). One way to prevent burnout is through the intentional offering of supervision that emphasizes awareness of and attention to emotional responses to work while promoting autonomy, support and meaning-making (Pereira, Fonseca, & Carvalho, 2011), especially when compared to supervision that solely focuses on knowledge acquisition and clinical skills (Sardiwalla, VandenBerg & Esterhuyse, 2007). Including art making in supervision allows for increased emotional reflection (Franklin, 1999). Studies with end-of-life care workers have proven its benefits in reducing burnout (Brooks, Bradt, Eyre, Hunt and Dileo, 2010; Italia, Favara-Scacco, Di Cataldo & Russo, 2008).

End-of-life care workers in Hong Kong participated in art therapy-based supervision (3 hour sessions for 6 weeks) that emphasized self-care, clinical practice and grief. Each session included art making, reflective writing and discussion. To determine efficacy, participants completed scales related to burnout (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996), mindfulness (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) and death attitudes (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994) at 3 time points (baseline, outcome, 1 month follow-up). Participants (n=69) were compared to those who participated in a standard supervision group (n=63) of comparable length and breadth.

The outcomes suggested art therapy based supervision had positive effect on burnout reduction. Results revealed the role art making played in increasing participant awareness of their emotions and comfort discussing death. Participants described how art-making fostered exploration of emotions, connection with colleagues, and new perspectives of challenging experiences. The research supports the value of art therapy based supervision for end-of-life care workers.

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