



INSIGHT

An Information Resource from COMCARE

Professional Quality of Life

The Concise ProQOL Manual defines “*professional quality of life*” as the quality one feels in relation to their work as a helper. Both the positive and negative aspects of doing your work influence your professional quality of life. People who work helping others may respond to individual, community, national, and even international crises. They may be health care professionals, social service workers, teachers, attorneys, police officers, firefighters, clergy, transportation staff, disaster responders, and others. Understanding the positive and negative aspects of helping those who experience trauma and suffering can improve your ability to help them and your ability to keep your own balance.¹

The difficulties to recruit and retain quality clinical staff at every level of the service delivery system are not just a condition in Pennsylvania but is felt throughout the nation. Counties and their service providers struggle to attract and retain highly skilled staff, but the employment market increasingly attracts them to similar or better compensation, with much less stress.

Leaders agree that attention must be focused on ways to create the conditions where...

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¹ Stamm, B.H. (2010). The Concise ProQOL Manual, 2nd Ed. Pocatello, ID: ProQOL.org.

Code of Ethics – Maintaining the High Bar in a Difficult Profession

The American Counseling Association (ACA) is an educational, scientific, and professional organization whose members work in a variety of settings and serve in multiple capacities. Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.



Professional values are an important way of living out an ethical commitment. The following are core professional values of the counseling profession:²

1. enhancing human development throughout the life span;
2. honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts;
3. promoting social justice;
4. safeguarding the integrity of the counselor–client relationship; and
5. practicing in a competent and ethical manner.

Professional values provide a conceptual basis for ethical behavior and decision making. In an ever more challenging environment, behavioral health counselors must maintain the following fundamental principles of professional ethical behavior:³

- *autonomy*, or fostering the right to control the direction of one's life;
- *nonmaleficence*, or avoiding actions that cause harm;
- *beneficence*, or working for the good of the individual and society by promoting mental health and well-being;
- *justice*, or treating individuals equitably and fostering fairness and equality;
- *fidelity*, or honoring commitments and keeping promises, including fulfilling one's responsibilities of trust in professional relationships; and
- *veracity*, or dealing truthfully with individuals with whom counselors come into professional contact.

Counselors are asked to facilitate their client's growth and overall health. Trust is the cornerstone of the counselor's relationship, and counselors have the responsibility to respect and safeguard their client's right to privacy and confidentiality as well as to honor their client's diverse cultural backgrounds. This high responsibility causes counselors to explore their own cultural and ethical identities and how these

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² 2014 ACA Code of Ethics; American Counseling Association; 2014.

³ Ibid.

Professional quality of life for those providing care has been a topic of growing interest over the past twenty years.

Research has shown that those who help people that have been exposed to traumatic stressors are at risk for developing negative symptoms associated with burnout, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

In this body of literature, typically known as secondary traumatization or vicarious traumatization, the positive feelings about people's ability to help are known as Compassion Satisfaction (CS). The negative, secondary outcomes have variously been identified as burnout, countertransference, Compassion Fatigue (CF) and Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS), and Vicarious Traumatization (VT).

The incidence of developing problems associated with the negative aspects of providing care are serious and can affect an individual, their family and close others, the care they provide, and their organizations.

The positive aspects of helping can be viewed as altruism; feeling good that you can do something to help. The negative effects of providing care are aggravated by the severity of the traumatic material to which the helper is exposed, such as direct contact with victims, particularly when the exposure is of a grotesque and graphic nature. The outcomes may include burnout, depression, increased use of substances, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder.

The overall concept of professional quality of life is complex because it is associated with characteristics of the work environment (organizational and task-wise), the individual's personal characteristics and the individual's exposure to primary and secondary trauma in the work setting.

Excerpted from Stamm, B.H. (2010). The Concise ProQOL Manual, 2nd Ed. Pocatello, ID: ProQOL.org.

affect the counseling process. Such rigorous professional standards demand that counselors have a "full tank" of compassion and emotional strength.

Often in giving professions, such as behavioral health counseling, counselors are challenged to maintain their professional quality of life and overcome their own personal stressors that can cause negative symptoms associated with burnout, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

The heavy emotional toll experienced by counselors may cause fatigue that does not permit them to be at their very best in the delivery of care to their clients as well as in the many other relationships (personal and professional) in their lives.

In short, if counselors are overly stressed or burned out and not entirely healthy, how can they provide quality services to their clients in line with the rigorous ethical standards of their profession?

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...new talent is brought into the workforce, and seasoned and experienced talent choose to stay.

Certainly, compensation is a driving factor – but the conditions and rigors of "the helping professions" demand that these employees maintain resilience and understand how compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue (which leads to burnout and secondary trauma) have a daily effect.

Many social workers choose to enter the profession because they derive a sense of satisfaction from helping others. Nonetheless, social work practitioners, educators, and students must be aware that working with vulnerable populations involves not only personal costs, but also the possibility of negative impacts on the worker and his or her family.

Professionals engaged in providing direct social work services often experience the physical and emotional effects of chronic, vicarious exposure to negative life events, placing these professionals at high risk of compassion fatigue.

To avoid compassion fatigue and maintain a healthy balance between professional service and personal renewal, social workers and other human service workers must learn to incorporate self-care into their daily lives. In addition, as a means of supporting mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, those in the helping professions should nurture the positive feelings that come from compassion satisfaction.

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The ProQOL Concise Manual 2010 (ProQOL) defines the following definitions used on their scale:

Compassion Satisfaction

- Compassion satisfaction is about the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well. For example, you may feel like it is a pleasure to help others through your work. You may feel positively about your colleagues or your ability to contribute to the work setting or even the greater good of society.

Compassion Fatigue

- Professional quality of life incorporates two aspects, the positive (Compassion Satisfaction) and the negative (Compassion Fatigue). Compassion fatigue breaks into two parts. The first part concerns things such as exhaustion, frustration, anger and depression typical of burnout. Secondary Traumatic Stress is a negative feeling driven by fear and work-related trauma. It is important to remember that some trauma at work can be direct (primary) trauma. Work-related trauma be a combination of both primary and secondary trauma.

Burnout

- Burnout is one element of the negative effects of caring that is known as Compassion Fatigue. Most people have an intuitive idea of what burnout is. From the research perspective, burnout is associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in dealing with work or in doing your job effectively. These negative feelings usually have a gradual onset. They can reflect the feeling that your efforts make no difference, or they can be associated with a very high workload or a non-supportive work environment.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

- Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is an element of Compassion fatigue (CF). STS is about work-related, secondary exposure to people who have experienced extremely or traumatically stressful events. The negative effects of STS may include fear sleep difficulties, intrusive images, or avoiding reminders of the person's traumatic experiences. STS is related to Vicarious Trauma as it shares many similar characteristics.

The ProQOL also provides a very short Compassion Satisfaction and Compassion Fatigue assessment tool for counselors or other “helping services” workers on their website (https://proqol.org/Home_Page.php). The Concise ProQOL Manual outlines the background and development of the tool and the assessment process, including instructions and scoring.

Scoring high on the compassion satisfaction scale indicates that you probably derive a good deal of professional satisfaction from your position; however, low scores may indicate you have problems with your job, or there may be some other reason (i.e. you derive satisfaction from places other than your job).

A low score on the burnout scale probably reflects positive feelings about your ability to be effective in your work; however, high scores may indicate you feel ineffective. While this score may reflect your mood at the time, if a high score persists over time, it may be reflective of other worries, and cause for concern.

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In a similar way, high scores on the secondary traumatic stress scale may indicate that something about work frightens you, and you should examine how you feel about your work and your work environment.

While the ProQOL is not a diagnostic test, the body of research on burnout and posttraumatic stress disorder indicates a close kinship with each to depression. What the ProQOL is designed to do is to raise issues to address with the use of appropriate diagnostic procedures.⁴



Signs of Social Work Burnout and Tips for Self-Care

In 1975, health care experts defined burnout as a state of being “inoperative” as a practitioner; this sums it up quite well. Frankly, how can social workers provide compassionate care and guidance when they are not taking care of themselves? Social work is exhausting, demanding, and emotionally draining at times; it can also be rewarding, restorative, and inspiring. It is truly sad to see effective practitioners leave the field of social work due to burnout and compassion fatigue. Caring for others takes a toll, so it is absolutely imperative that social workers learn to first take care of themselves. Some signs of compassion fatigue and burnout are:

- Sleep disturbances or insomnia.
- Irritability or depressed mood.
- Lack of patience.
- Lack of enthusiasm for things you once enjoyed.
- Estrangement from others.
- Increased startle response.
- Flashbacks.
- Intrusive thoughts.
- Fear and anxiety.
- Feelings of hopelessness.
- Fatigue.
- Difficulty separating work and personal time.
- Preoccupation with work.
- Lack of compassion toward others.
- Feelings of resentment.
- Increased use of vices (alcohol, drugs, gambling) to cope with everyday stressors.

⁴ Stamm, B.H. (2010). The Concise ProQOL Manual, 2nd Ed. Pocatello, ID: ProQOL.org.

As social workers, it is important to pay attention to self-care and to take steps to avoid burnout and compassion fatigue.

- ✓ **Set limits.** Don't be afraid of setting limits related to your schedule, client needs, and even your family commitments. A structured schedule is the best way to prevent burnout and to clearly identify when you work and when you have down time.
- ✓ **Eat, drink, and sleep well.** Good health is important for maintaining the rigorous schedule and demands of social work. When you eat healthily, stay hydrated, and get well-rested, you are less vulnerable to burnout.
- ✓ **Maintain your boundaries.** Perhaps the most important thing that you can do to prevent burnout is to maintain firm boundaries with clients, colleagues, and even friends or family. Boundary issues are usually covered in ethics classes, continuing education courses, and work-related retreats, but it bears repeating. Maintain your boundaries and don't give in to pressures that, over time, could be the straw that breaks the camel's back.
- ✓ **Make time for you.** Do something creative to relieve stress and prevent burnout. Social workers often prescribe creative pursuits like music, journaling, and art to clients to reduce stress, and it can help practitioners, too. Any leisure activity that soothes you and makes you feel restored is an excellent self-care strategy.
- ✓ **Don't be a sponge.** Watch how you respond to hearing clients recount traumatizing events during interventions or interactions; are you preoccupied with this later on? Are you experiencing flashbacks related to the client's situation? Social workers tend to 'soak-up' what their clients convey and share, and in many instances, this can be painful, troubling information. Vicarious traumatization is when social workers are traumatized by the experiences of their client – which can be debilitating and overwhelming. This trauma makes you at very high risk of compassion fatigue without swift and immediate action, such as a vacation or an honest talk with your supervisor.
- ✓ **Engage in physical activity.** Brisk physical activity for at least 20 minutes each day can increase the feel-good hormones in your brain and offer an anti-depressant type effect. Start your day with a walk before work, or unwind at the end of the day with a swim at your local pool.
- ✓ **Take time off.** You are given personal days at work for a reason; don't let this get eaten up for other purposes and deprive yourself of much-needed time for you. Plan and take your vacations, too. Even if it doesn't seem feasible to travel far away, any slight change of environment and scenery can be invigorating – even if only for a day or two.
- ✓ **Talk to someone.** Identify someone that you can talk to about work, your stressors, and whatever happens to be on your mind, such as a supervisor at work or a therapist outside of the job. Due to the confidential nature of the job, it isn't easy to share what is weighing on you with friends or family so find someone that you can open up to and that can offer some guidance and advice. It is truly disheartening to see caring, compassionate social workers leave the field due to feeling overwhelmed and burned out. You work hard for your social work degree and licensure, so be sure to protect it by paying attention to self-care. Don't wait until it is too late to seek out help and implement strategies to reduce burnout symptoms and alleviate compassion fatigue.



Excerpt from “Nip it in the Bud: Signs of Social Work Burnout and Tips for Self-Care; FSU Online, April 15, 2019; <https://onlinemsw.fsu.edu/blog/2016/10/04/nip-it-bud-signs-social-work-burnout-and-tips-self-care>

Statement from Chuck Ingoglia, President and CEO, National Council for Behavioral Health on Passage of the Continuing Resolution that Includes Funding for the Excellence in Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Expansion Act

November 21, 2019 – National Council for Behavioral Health President and CEO Chuck Ingoglia today released the following statement in response to Congressional approval of a continuing resolution that includes an extension of funding for the bipartisan Excellence in Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Expansion Act (S. 824/H.R. 1767). The bill provides funding through December 20, 2019 for the 66 Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs) that provide vital mental health and addiction treatment services in eight states.

“Today’s vote is nothing short of a lifeline to the thousands of people who rely on Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs) for life-saving care. CCBHCs have proven their value at expanding access to addiction care and reducing overdose deaths, suicides and psychiatric hospitalization in their communities. They are also providing 24/7 crisis care along with support for law enforcement officers responding to people in crisis. CCBHCs are the model for the future and today’s vote keeps them alive for now. But they cannot operate without reliable funding. It is essential that Congress moves quickly to pass legislation that sustains and expands CCBHCs for the future.”

“We applaud the continued leadership of Senators Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), along with Representatives Markwayne Mullin (R-Okla.), Doris Matsui (D-Calif.), Greg Walden (R-Ore.) and Frank Pallone (D-N.J.). And we will continue to work with them on a long-term solution that not only provides permanent funding for existing CCBHCs, but also expands the program to additional states.”

Press Release from National Council for Behavioral Health; <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/press-releases/statement-from-chuck-ingoglia-on-november-21-2019-cr/>; November 21, 2019.

In December 2016, the state won a demonstration grant to receive an enhanced federal matching rate on payments to the CCBHCs. DHS estimates it could be an additional \$10 million in federal funding. The Department's final selection includes 7 locations, comprised of both rural and urban locations throughout the commonwealth:

- Berks Counseling Center, Berks County
- Cen Clear Child Services, Clearfield County
- Cen Clear Child Services, Jefferson County
- Northeast Treatment Centers, Philadelphia
- Pittsburgh Mercy, Allegheny County
- Resources for Human Development, Montgomery County
- The Guidance Center, McKean County

Final Thoughts...

“Unrecognized and untreated compassion fatigue causes people to leave their profession, fall into the throws of addictions or in extreme cases become self-destructive or suicide. It is important that we all understand this phenomenon for our own well-being, but also for our colleagues. If you notice a colleague in distress- reach out to them. Let them know you care and are available to talk if they need.” – Angelea Panos, Ph.D., Gift from Within.

INSIGHT is published monthly by COMCARE, a program of the County Commissioner’s Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP). If you wish to provide comments or feedback, please forward your comments to Lucy Kitner or Michele Denk at COMCARE at the following email addresses: lkitner@pacounties.org; mdenk@pacounties.org. *Thank You.*