



Counselor Spotlight: Counselor Well-being and Mental Health

Healthcare Providers Service Organization (HPSO), in collaboration with CNA, has published our *Counselor Professional Liability Exposure Claim Report: 3rd Edition*. The report includes statistical data and case scenarios from CNA claim files, along with information on where to access risk management resources designed to help counselors reduce their professional liability exposures and improve client safety. You may access the complete report, and additional Risk Control Spotlights, at: www.hpso.com/counselorclaimreport.

This Counselor Spotlight focuses on a critical, yet often overlooked, topic for counselors: Counselor well-being and mental health. To effectively support others, counselors must first establish healthy boundaries and prioritize their own self-care and well-being. This Spotlight explores the occupational hazards that counselors may encounter in their practice—challenges that, if left unaddressed, can negatively impact both their physical and mental health, as well as the outcomes for their clients.

Occupational Hazards, Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Vicarious Trauma

Most counselors begin their careers with a strong dedication to supporting their clients’ mental health and overall well-being. However, over time, if their focus remains solely on clients while neglecting their own self-care, this commitment can give way to burnout and compassion fatigue. Although counselors are trained to identify mental health concerns in others, they may unintentionally overlook, minimize, or dismiss the early warning signs of emotional exhaustion in themselves.

Warning Signs of Burnout	Warning Signs of Compassion Fatigue
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anger• Frustration• Negativity• Withdrawal• Fatigue• Cynicism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoidance• Addiction• Detachment• Sadness• Grief• Lack of intimacy

Terms

- **Burnout** is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and is listed in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one’s job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job and reduced personal efficacy”.
- **Compassion fatigue** is related to vicarious trauma and is specifically associated with empathy. Compassion, empathy and engagement are the cornerstones of the counselor-client relationship, however, over time, may contribute to mental exhaustion when counselors are treating clients who are undergoing painful experiences.
- **Vicarious trauma** refers to the psychological distress experienced by counselors who are chronically exposed to the traumatic experiences of clients during the course of their work thereby altering the counselor’s “world view”.

Occupational hazards are any work-related risks that can result in a personal injury and/or illness. Hazards are the physical and emotional responses that happen when the requirements of a job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. These include long clinical hours, increased excessive workloads, administrative tasks, workflow inefficiencies, organizational culture, lack of control with one's schedule, loss of professional autonomy, staff shortages, and regulatory burdens.

There are also several risk factors and occupational challenges that may increase a counselor's vulnerability to burnout and compassion fatigue, such as social isolation, lack of experience and chronic exposure to clients experiencing intense trauma. In addition, counselors who have a personal history of trauma may be triggered by exposure to a client's trauma. This related trauma may be referred to as vicarious trauma. The Positive Psychology (2024) website lists common signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma. These include:

- Emotional exhaustion and feeling depleted (i.e., "running on empty")
- High stress levels resulting in persistent worry, restlessness, irritability, or hypervigilance
- Depersonalization, where counselors may begin to feel numb or disconnected from their clients' experiences
- Difficulty with professional boundaries, such as getting overly involved with clients' lives and feeling responsible for them outside of the professional relationship
- Compassion fatigue, where practitioners are desensitized over time, making it difficult for them to empathize with their clients' experiences as they once did.
- Somatic symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal issues, fatigue, or insomnia
- Avoidance behaviors to cope with their distress, including avoiding certain clients or topics related to trauma, as well as avoiding discussions or reflections on their own emotional responses to their work
- Impaired professional functioning, including difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or managing workloads
- Disrupted personal relationships or a diminished interest in activities they once enjoyed (e.g., those working with sexual abuse survivors may lose interest in physical intimacy with their partner)

Challenges in the U.S. Health Care System

- One in three patients/clients report dissatisfaction with their care and outcomes.
- Healthcare worker burnout lowers patient/client care quality: Staffing challenges decrease patients'/clients' access to care.
- High workloads, administrative burdens, and poorly designed technologies divert providers' time away from patient care.
- Barriers to patient/client-provider communication and errors are more likely.
- The cost to the healthcare system is at least \$4.6 billion annually.
- About half of healthcare professionals experience burnout – leading to anxiety, stress, exhaustion, and even suicide.
- High-stress work environments are driving 20% of physicians and 40% of nurses to leave practice. More than 30% of public health workers are also considering leaving.

If counselors are trained to recognize psychological distress in their clients, why might they minimize or downplay signs of burnout or compassion fatigue in themselves?

Caring for clients' psychological issues comes naturally for most counselors. However, self-reflection and self-care may not come naturally and seem overindulgent. To add to the feeling of overindulgence, there is still a perceived stigma and reluctance for healthcare professionals to take steps to maintain their well-being and mental health. So, what causes our reluctance to seek mental health treatment for ourselves?

Counselors are trained on how burnout and compassion fatigue can threaten personal relationships, professional careers and client outcomes. However, studies indicate that fear of stigma and professional repercussions deter counselors from seeking help, especially when disclosing mental health history for licensing and credentialing. Counselors may also fear that managing their personal well-being and mental health obligations may be looked upon as being weak, incompetent or unprofessional.

Well-being and Mental Health are a Matter of National Importance

National institutions, such as the [National Academy of Medicine \(NAM\)](#) and [The Joint Commission \(TJC\)](#), report that burnout and compassion fatigue are longstanding national problems that threaten providers' health, patient/client outcomes, and the overall quality and availability of the national healthcare system. NAM and TJC encourage all healthcare organizations to prioritize the well-being and mental health of healthcare providers by the following:

1. **Commit** to well-being and mental health by removing barriers providers can face when seeking mental healthcare.
2. **Appoint** a senior leader with the ability to establish and implement organizational strategies.
3. **Assess** the initial well-being and mental health within the organization for a baseline.
4. **Implement** necessary strategies and interventions that are tailored to the specific needs and challenges of the organization.
5. **Monitor** the progress of well-being and mental health by conducting regular assessment of strategies implemented.

While the guidance from the NAM and TJC primarily targets how healthcare organizations can address burnout and compassion fatigue, individual counselors can apply many of these strategies by *committing* to well-being and mental health as a priority, *assessing* personal well-being and mental health, *implementing* strategies, and *monitoring* progress on a regular basis.

Spotlights on Risk Management

To supplement the **Counselor Professional Liability Exposure Claim Report: 3rd Edition**, CNA

and HPSO will publish seven Spotlight documents, which will highlight specific topics and provide greater detail on key risk management strategies and client safety practices.

The following Counselor Spotlights include resources such as case studies, risk control considerations, and self-assessment checklists designed to help counselors evaluate and mitigate risk exposures associated with current practice:

- [Defending Your License](#)
- [Non-Sexual Boundaries](#)
- [Well-being and Provider Mental Health](#)
- [Telebehavioral Health](#) - coming soon!
- [Liability Risks for Business Owners and Supervisors](#) - coming soon!
- [Managing Clients in Crisis](#) - coming soon!
- [Documentation](#) - coming soon!



Risk Management Recommendations

Counselors can better serve clients if they are mentally and emotionally equipped to deal with difficult situations. It is not enough for a counselor to know how self-care and self-care routines are beneficial to the overall well-being and mental health of a person if they ignore their own personal mental health struggles. Counselors have to recognize occupational hazards and seek treatment and/or support when they experience any of the early warning signs of burnout and compassion fatigue.

Listed below are several free online tools and resources that can be used to assess one's personal well-being and mental health as well as tips and recommendations for self-care.

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This information was excerpted from HPSO and CNA's full report, *Counselor Liability Claim Report: 3rd Edition*.
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In addition to this publication, CNA and Healthcare Providers Service Organization (HPSO) have produced numerous studies and articles that provide useful risk control information on topics relevant to counselors, as well as information relating to counselor professional liability insurance, at www.hpso.com. These publications are also available by contacting CNA at 1.888.600.4776 or at www.cna.com.

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