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Counseling and Education to Stop Domestic Violence

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Welcome to Summer!

Summertime means vacation time for most students and many parents and families. Because of the inherently stressful nature of abuser education work, it is always important to find ways to relax and take advantage of good weather and time away from work. This month's main article focuses on the topic of burnout, both in group as well as for group leaders in our personal lives.

Stress & Burnout In Abuser Education

Personal and Group Strategies

by Christopher Hall, EmERGE Group Leader

Abuser education counselors face a number of challenges. These include dealing with resistant clients, contact with partners/victims (in some locations), striking a balance between educating and confronting, and many others.

Being an abuser education counselor is rarely boring. There is significant variation in the types of topics group leaders get to discuss and present, and clients are always presenting new spins on excuses and rationalizations for their hurtful behavior.

As interesting as the work can be, it is also stressful. Some group leaders experience 'secondary trauma' from hearing about horrible examples of abusive behavior. Ironically, group counselors sometimes neglect their own self-care, even while prodding their clients to take better care of themselves. Yet it is critical for group leaders to learn how to manage stress and take the time to debrief from interactions with abusers in ways that are healthy and productive to our continued work. Before we can do this, we must first recognize some of the pathways to stress and burnout. These include the following:

PERSONAL INVESTMENT IN MAKING CLIENTS CHANGE: Some group leaders overextend themselves by thinking they have the power to change an abuser. When giving feedback to abusers, we often tell abusers they can only change their own behavior, and attempts to change their partners are likely to be controlling and abusive. Yet, they may expect us to control or to fix them. We all make mistakes, and it helps to have a good supervisor to point out when I slip into "fix" mode with a client. In contrast to believing you can change abusers, accept that you can do the best possible job by giving feedback and providing alternatives to group members.

COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE: Oversimplified, counter-transference is when a personal reaction to an abuser education client interferes with the effective provision of services.





There are always going to be abusers you like, and some you don't. In supervision, you and your co-leader can decide who approaches a client that you find challenging, or are overly sympathetic towards. As a matter of routine, I suggest that counselors should assess whether and to what degree particular clients evoke unusually positive or negative feelings. Then in supervision, you and your co-leader can strategize about how to appropriately conduct group sessions despite these feelings.

DEHUMANIZATION: When group leaders enter into verbal struggles where they begin to demonize or shame abusers, it often leads to mutual antagonism. Some clients shut down while others get defensive or hostile. Both clients and group leaders may oscillate between apathy and hostility and the opportunity for constructive work is lost. Unnecessary and unproductive conflict is stressful for group leaders and can possibly lead to disinterest in conducting services for abusers.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRESSORS: Necessary paperwork and contacts with referral sources can be overwhelming. Abuser education counselors are usually underpaid and overworked. There are no simple answers to these problems, and while we can all improve our time management skills, these problems have a structural and institutional component at the agency and systems level. Individual group leaders, if it is safe and they are comfortable doing so, can make efforts to discuss such issues with program management. Those who supervise abuser education programs need to keep in mind that conducting services for abusers is very stressful, and administrative concerns can increase their counselor's stress exponentially. Being open to feedback as a supervisor can help to create an environment that allows opportunities for counselors to ask for help in managing exceptionally heavy administrative overload.

One of the first things I heard when being trained to work in this field was to make sure that each counselor has interests outside of the domestic violence field. Initially, it was easy to overdo things by reading and talking and thinking about DV and related issues both at work and during my personal time. Our culture is saturated with DV related material. All DV all the time just doesn't work, and becomes stressful in and of itself.

It's summertime! Let's focus on having fun and taking the time to relax!

[To read an article for "Life Advice on Being Healthy," click this link.](#)

Thanks again for your continued interest and support of Emerge! We hope you have an excellent summer and are able to work on your own self-care throughout the season!

Best Regards,

Emerge: Counseling & Education to Stop Domestic Violence

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