



## THEMES FROM RETROSPECTIVE INTERVIEWS OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS WHO EXPERIENCED BURNOUT

### TÜKENMİŞLİK YAŞAYAN OKUL PSİKOLOJİK DANIŞMANLARIYLA YAPILAN RETROSPEKTİF GÖRÜŞMELERDEN ORTAYA ÇIKAN TEMALAR

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**ABSTRACT:** Phenomenological retrospective interviews of three female school counselors who had experienced burnout were conducted and analyzed for themes in an effort to understand the participants' personal meanings. Several common themes that emerged from the data analysis are discussed, and recommendations for practice and research are suggested.

**Keywords:** counselor impairment, counselor burnout, prevention of burnout

**OZET:** Tükenmişlik yaşayan üç okul psikolojik danışmanı ile fenomenolojik retrospektif görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiş ve katılımcılar için tükenmişliğin kişisel anlamlarını anlayabilmek amacıyla temalar analiz edilmiştir. Analizler sonucu ortaya çıkan bir kaç tema tartışılmış, uygulamalar ve araştırmalar için bazı öneriler sunulmuştur.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** psikolojik danışmanların tükenmişliği, tükenmişlik temaları, tükenmişliği önleme

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Kottler and Hazler (1996) estimated conservatively that over 6,000 counselors were currently practicing in the United States while suffering from some type of mental or emotional impairment. They stated that impairment is a basic human factor in that: "Any one of us could become impaired to the point in which we could hurt someone. Any one of us could lose control. Any of us could become depressed, or abuse alcohol, or suffer a tragedy from which we cannot recover" (Kottler & Hazler, 1996, p. 101). The human factors that allow us to invent and produce also make us more susceptible to errors and misjudgments. "We are not flawless machines" (Kottler & Hazler, p. 101). Although aware of the problem, the counseling profession has conducted limited research with respect to counselor impairment. Olsheski and Leech (1996) stated: "The literature that specifically addresses impairment in the counseling profession is quite limited" (p. 132).

Cummings and Nall (1983) identified *burnout* as a form of counselor impairment. Maslach (1993) believed that burnout is caused by stressful work environments (a.k.a. job stress) or external factors such as large caseloads, demanding supervisors, and too many responsibilities to adequately perform one's job. Burnout is viewed as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1993). Pines and Aronson (1988) define burnout as: "A state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that were emotionally demanding" (p. 9). They also believe that certain work environments can affect burnout rates (Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981). Specifically, they found that environments that are predominantly stressful and provide little support, resources and autonomy do not promote successful attainment of the goals and expectations of workers.

Freudenberger is thought to have coined the term, burnout, in 1974 after experiencing the phenomenon personally in the 1960s (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980). He defines burnout as a process in which one depletes or exhausts his or her physical and mental resources by excessively striving to meet unrealistic expectations that are for the most part self imposed. As disappointments and frustrations increase, burnout-prone persons work harder to achieve their goals which, in turn,

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causes increasing exhaustion (Frueденburger, 1983, 1986). This leads to additional perceptions of failure and increased self-imposed pressure to succeed.

Cherniss (1993) viewed burnout as a function of perceived professional self-efficacy. Professional self-efficacy is defined as a belief in one's ability to perform job duties, work harmoniously with others, and influence the social and political environment in an organization. Burnout occurs when one's belief in her or his personal self-efficacy is lacking.

Thus, these earlier writers perceived burnout as a phenomenon caused by stressful work environments and external factors (Maslach, 1993) which create emotionally demanding environments (Pines & Aronson, 1988) that lead to a depletion of one's physical and mental resources (Frueденburger, 1983, 1986). Consequently, thoughts of being unable to work effectively occur (Cherniss, 1993), and a spiral of increasing self-imposed pressure and frustration leads to perceptions of failure (Frueденburger, 1983, 1986). This certainly appears to be a formula for counselor impairment.

More recently, Skovholt (2001) hypothesized that burnout can occur either when caring for and giving to others loses its meaning to counselors or when they lose their ability to form therapeutic attachments with clients because of too many depleting counseling relationship separations. He stated: "The presence of losses and the absence of gains in the caring cycle of empathic attachment--active involvement--felt separation contribute to burnout" (p.113).

Skovholt' (2001) seemed to view counselor burnout as a process. The loss of meaning and capacity for caring cited above may occur over time because counselors wear down like batteries. Also, counselors may enter the profession with vulnerabilities. Skovholt (2001) wrote: "There are often especially difficult incidents over the years of practice that lead to loss of innocence. . . . Practice can wound the practitioner. Often the vulnerability is unknown. The person may not have known before that a field that can do so much good can also wound its practitioners" (p. 105).

Previous research on burnout primarily has been correlational. Cummings and Nall (1982, 1983) reported finding a relationship between leadership style and burnout. In their study, school counselors who perceived their school environments as having more authoritarian leadership styles seemed to report higher incidences of burnout than those in schools where the environments were less authoritarian and more participatory or democratic. Davis, Savicki, Cooley, and Firth (1989) found a negative relationship between dissatisfaction with supervision and perception of decreased personal accomplishment and a positive relationship between dissatisfaction with supervision and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Their findings also suggest the importance of the influence of the leadership or supervision environment.

In another correlational study, Stickel (1991) found a relationship between job satisfaction and burnout in a sample of school counselors working in rural settings. Both depersonalization and emotional exhaustion were negatively correlated with job satisfaction. Conversely, there was a positive relationship between personal accomplishment and job satisfaction.

Although information acquired from correlational studies is useful (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1998), correlational data also provides only limited knowledge about the burnout phenomenon because just one research design has been employed. The next step in studying school counselor burnout appeared to be to conduct a qualitative study using phenomenological interviews. A qualitative approach lends itself to understanding the process of a phenomenon (Bogdon & Biklen, 1992). Phenomenological interviews provide more comprehensive sets of data than correlational studies are usually able to provide and may help explore the personal meaning each participant attributes to having experienced burnout.

School counselors were targeted as the participant population because contributions to the professional literature had indicated that they can be quite susceptible to symptoms of burnout due to the nature of their work (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Kesler, 1990). An additional reason for selecting school counselors was that participants in the previously cited correlational studies (Cummings & Nall 1982, Davis et al. 1989, and Stickel, 1991) were school counselors. Moracco, Butcke, and McEwen

(1984) found that significant numbers of school counselors reported related stress leading to burnout, and stress associated with school counseling may affect their health and job performance adversely (Olson & Dilley, 1988). Cummings and Nall (1983) concluded that, although some have written about stress and burnout in school counseling, related research is needed.

The goal of the present study was to learn more about school counselor burnout by gathering information from those who had previously experienced it. Five general goals, stated here as questions, formed the foundation of the phenomenological interviews that were conducted: (a) What is the individual, unique, and subjective meaning that participants ascribe to their experience of burnout? (b) What is the process by which this phenomenon occurs? (c) What are the causes of burnout? (d) How should the phenomenon be addressed by the profession? (e) Do personality factors play an important role in burnout?

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants were three female school counselors who varied in terms of ethnicity, age, number of years of experience as school counselors, previous employment experience, and work settings. They are identified by pseudonyms. Mary, a 53-year old European American women, had been a school counselor for over 30 years. She began her career as a middle school counselor in Florida for two years. She then moved to North Carolina where she was a high school counselor for 21 years. She switched to elementary school counseling for seven years. At the time she was interviewed for the present study, she served as a middle/high school counselor for an alternative school program. All of her professional employment experience was as a counselor. She reported experiencing burnout in her previous position as a high school counselor.

Ann, a 40-year old European American woman, worked as a test administrator and teaching assistant while completing her undergraduate degree. Upon graduation, she obtained employment as an elementary school teacher for three years. She was employed overseas as an elementary school counselor for three years after receiving her master's degree. She then moved to North Carolina and took a job as a middle school counselor for one year which was when she experienced burnout. She switched to elementary school counseling for one year and again experienced burnout. She then took a position as a school social worker for three years. At the time of her interview for the present study, she had been employed as an elementary school counselor for three years.

Beth, a 32-year old African American woman, worked as an administrative assistant for a technical writer after obtaining her undergraduate degree. She then was employed as an elementary school teacher for three and one-half years. After completing her master's degree in counseling, she obtained employment as an elementary school counselor. For two years she served as both an elementary and middle school counselor which led to feeling burned out. At the time she was interviewed for the present study, she had been an elementary school counselor for three years.

### **2.2. Phenomenological Interviews**

The interview guide format (Patton, 1990), also known as the semi-structured interview format (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), was used to elicit participant and participant-specific themes. Probing questions were used by the researcher/interviewer to explore significant areas. Open-ended questions allowed participants latitude in their responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Seidman, 1991). Two interviews, each approximately 60 minutes in length, were conducted with each participant over a period of two weeks.

The primary focus of the first interview was to establish rapport via discussion about the context in which participants experienced burnout. Topics included: specifying duties of school counselors,

identifying the most stressful components of their work, sharing their personal experiences with burnout, and thinking about how the profession might address the problem. The interviewer's goal was to elicit stories about current and past experiences, acquire details about their lives, and piece together meaning within each participant's context.

The purpose of the second interview was to elicit information from a more personal perspective and to clarify information derived from the first interviews. Topics included: (a) describing the ideal school counseling job, (b) comparing their present job or the job they were in when experiencing the highest point of burnout with the ideal, (c) recollecting expectations before becoming school counselors, (d) comparing recollections with expectations at the present or their highest point of burnout, (e) expressing what needs were met by becoming school counselors, (f) expressing what needs had not been met, and (g) expressing how unmet needs have affected their lives. The interviewer focused on thoughts, expectations, and needs in order to identify whether or not personality characteristics may play a role in burnout.

The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by a third party. The transcripts were then sent to the participants to be reviewed for accuracy. Known as *member checks*, the participants' reviews for accuracy provided evidence of validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An auditor examined verbatim transcripts of the interviews independently in order to determine whether or not the themes derived by the researcher-interviewer were categorized adequately, providing a reliability check (Hill, Thompson & Williams, 1997; Merriam, 1988). In addition, the auditor examined all of the researcher-interviewer's methodological decisions in order to determine whether or not the findings were credible, providing overall evidence of validity. In the present study, the auditor was a licensed professional counselor who had studied qualitative research methods and conducted her own qualitative research project.

## **2.3. Procedure**

### **2.3.1. Data collection**

The researcher-interviewer interviewed four current or former school counselors in order to conceptualize the study better. The interviewees nominated two of the three participants in the present study. The third participant had come to the attention of the researcher-interviewer in his capacity as a university practicum supervisor. Known as purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or the purposeful sampling strategy (Bogden & Biklen, 1992; Spradley, 1979), selecting a small sample of information-rich participants allowed the researcher-interviewer to conduct an in-depth study and learn a great deal about burnout from the participants (Patton, 1990).

The researcher-interviewer explained the nature of the study via a telephone conversation and scheduled the first interview. Informed consent forms were presented and signed during the first interview. Copies of the interview questions were mailed to the participants in advance of each interview, and copies of the interview transcripts were mailed to the participants as soon as they were available. Following completion of the first interview, the participants were asked whether or not they wished to continue with the second interview, and, following an affirmative response, the second interview appointment was set.

### **2.3.2. Data analysis**

The first step was to read the transcripts while listening to the recorded interviews in order to detect transcribing errors (Patton, 1990). Next, the transcripts were re-read several times, and preliminary categories were coded (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Then, the preliminary categories were analyzed, refined, and organized into more meaningful themes of the participants and common themes across participants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Two strategies were employed for determining themes and categories: frequency and uniqueness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Categories were first created and then analyzed to determine themes. The researcher-interviewer systematically tried to understand the meanings the participants attributed to their personal events and actions by not imposing his frame of reference on to their stories. As important thoughts occurred during the data analysis process, the researcher-interviewer wrote memos for himself and the auditor in order to better clarify the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This inductive process of identifying emerging themes is referred to as *grounded theory* (Charmaz, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The auditor's actions mirrored those of the researcher-interviewer.

### 3. FINDINGS

Four common themes emerged. They were identified as (a) important beliefs, (b) burnout feelings, (c) burnout attitude, and (d) collegial support. The participants experienced some common and different sub-themes that are introduced as well: (a) student contact, (b) a desire to do wonderful things for children, (c) too many unrelated duties and not enough time to complete them, (d) role conflict, (e) can't take it any more, (f) tired of dealing with people's problems, (g) contemplating changing jobs within or out of the profession, and (h) not wanting to deal with anyone. The findings are under subheadings that represent the four common themes.

#### 3.1. Important Beliefs

Mary's important beliefs were that she should engage in *student contact* via individual and group counseling and group guidance and *do wonderful things for children*. She stated: "I just wanted to be this super lady that helped all these, did all these wonderful things for children. I was going to be their savior." As a high school counselor, she was unable to achieve these goals because there were *too many duties unrelated to student contact and not enough time to complete them*. Ann also believed she should engage in *student contact* via individual and group counseling and classroom guidance--with an emphasis on the latter--in order to achieve both preventive and remedial goals. She believed her having burned out was caused by *too many unrelated duties and not enough time* to do them. These duties prevented her from developing adequate classroom guidance activities and left her with a program that was primarily remedial in nature. Beth, as well, believed her main role was *student contact* and that she *had too many duties and not enough time*. She stated: "I feel like maybe I'm not doing my full job if they [students] can't call me by name." Activities such as paper and committee work were stressful and tedious at times. *Role conflict*, that is, assuming the responsibilities of other persons while serving concurrently as an elementary and secondary school counselor, was stressful. Beth stated: "I don't really think they had a clear concept [of the school counselor's role] because I feel like my role there was put in whatever is left over [substitute teaching; playground duty]."

Mary's desire "to do wonderful things," Ann's high expectations of herself, and Beth's belief that students should be able to call her by name appear to be examples of excessively striving to meet self-imposed unrealistic expectations. According to Freudenburger and Richelson (1980), these responses to unrealistic expectations may lead to exhausting one's physical and mental resources and eventually to burnout.

#### 3.2. Burnout Feelings

All three participants reported experiencing feelings commonly associated with burnout. Mary experienced intense feelings of frustration, boredom, incompetence, uselessness, lacking control, frustration, and hopelessness: "I didn't think I was doing any good for anybody. . . .I felt like I was cutting students short. . . .When I look back at it I had no control over my day. . . .I just *can't go on this way*." Perceiving that her program was ineffective, Ann felt "inferior in every way," incompetent, and unhelpful: "The things that were brought to you were just so big you couldn't solve it." Prior to a Christmas holiday vacation, she experienced a sense of dread: "I can remember. . . .crying when I left the parking lot because I had to come back in two weeks." On Sundays prior to returning to work on

Mondays, she reported "*not wanting to go back to work.*" *Beth* felt overwhelmed because there did not seem to be enough hours in the day. She also felt tired and incompetent: "I will look at the kids and I'm thinking 'this is not the response I want'." Like Ann, *Beth* also had feelings of dread: "When you couldn't wait to leave work. And, then you *dreaded going back.*" In their own words, all three participants seemed to be examples of Skovholt's (2001) "wounded practitioners." They also seemed to reflect Maslach's (1993) "emotional exhaustion" syndrome and the "state of emotional and mental exhaustion" found by Pines and Aronson (1988).

### 3.3. Burnout Attitude

*Mary* felt that she *couldn't take it any more and decided to look for another job either within or outside of the profession.* She was experiencing despair to the point of making sacrifices: "I was ready to sacrifice our home. ... whatever financial advantages we were having from my working. ... I was just *tired of dealing with people's problems.* ... I don't care what I do, but I have got to make a change." *Ann* also came to a point where despair led her to feel she just *could not do it any more.* She defined burnout as: "I think it would mean that you have kind of given up, or you're going through the motions; but you don't feel like you're doing the kind of program you wanted to do anymore." She began to *contemplate changing jobs* in order to end her pain, yet there was a spiritual struggle over making the right choice: "I had a lot of inner turmoil going on because sometimes you don't want jobs that are really difficult. You want jobs that are easier. But, that's where my calling is; maybe that's where I needed to be. Then, I should stay there and not complain." *Beth* also *contemplated changing jobs*: "When I was a classroom teacher, I felt that I was definitely burned out. I said it was time to move on. And, sometimes now [as a school counselor] I think, I'm not going to do this till the year I'm supposed to retire. ... what are the options?" Like *Mary*, *Beth* felt she *could not do it any more*: "You get to the point where it is no longer fun coming to work or when you are just tired and you. ... shut the door and don't want to deal with any one, that is when you're experiencing burnout." The responses attributed in this section to the participants provide further evidence of Skovholt's (2001) "wounded practitioners," with all three participants seeming to lack personal self-efficacy regarding their profession (Cherniss, 1993).

### 3.4. Collegial Support

Across the three primary themes, each of the participants referred in their own way to a lack of collegial support. Interestingly, this sub-theme occurred in support of different primary themes for the three participants. *Ann* reported "lack of support" as "being the only one there. . . .not having another counselor that you can talk to, can share things with. And, I did not have that, which I think contributed [to my burnout]." She recommended that the counseling profession needed to promote the idea of counselors helping other counselors during personally and professionally difficult times. *Beth* sought support as a means of helping herself: "So, having the support of other counselors, I think, is a big benefit. Personally, I feel like if I didn't have any other counselors to call on for things I need, I would truly feel like I was in a box alone." While dealing with what was categorized as her sub-theme of *coping with burnout*, *Mary* promoted school counselors as helping other school counselors who suffer from burnout, possibly through an employee assistance program: "I think that in some school situations they have a counselor for teachers. They call it the employee assistance program or something like that. I guess we probably need some of that. . . .We need to be there for each other." These requests for help or recommendations for collegial support highlight statements by Cummings and Nall (1982,1983) and by Davis, Savicki, Cooley, and Firth (1989) about the importance and influence of leadership and supervision styles.

## 4. DISCUSSION

A quest to understand the unique meanings participants attributed to their burnout experiences, to understand the burnout process better, to discover recommendations to the counseling profession,

and to seek evidence of the influence of personality factors guided the interviewing process in the present study. All of these goals were realized to some extent in the four themes that emerged from the data analysis; that is, important beliefs, burnout feelings, burnout attitude, and collegial support.

Recall that Maslach (1993) and Pines and Aronson (1988) focused on external, environmental factors as being the most influential causes of burnout while Freudenberger (1983) and Cherniss (1993) emphasized internal, personality factors. In the present study, it appears as if both external and internal factors played important roles in the burnout experiences of Mary and Ann. Mary and Ann both reported being unable to complete unrelated duties due to time constraints and having difficult supervisors. Their circumstances reflect the effect of stressful work environments cited by Cummings and Nall (1983). Mary reported important needs that were unrealized: to be helpful, to nurture students, and to experience diversity in work-related duties. Ann's unrealized needs were for respect, approval, and support of colleagues. Both Mary and Ann appear to have experienced low professional self-efficacy due to these unrealized needs. Cherniss (1993) pointed out that low professional self-efficacy may lead to burnout. Mullenbach and Skovholt (2001) supported the external and internal factors position stated above in the themes they reported from Mullenbach's dissertation research.

Several beliefs or needs emerged from the thematic analysis that may be indicators of attitudes which cause counselors to be prone to burning out. They are: (a) the most important aspect of the job is having contact with clients; (b) one should be able to do wonderful things for the clients; (c) clients should know their counselors by name; (d) respect, approval, and support of colleagues are requisites; and (e) work-related duties should be diverse. These attitudes support Freudenberger and Richelson's (1980) position on unrealistic expectations, and Skovholt's (2001) contention that counselors lose their innocence over time and become more vulnerable.

Family problems that are unrelated to one's work also may contribute to becoming burned-out, particularly in combination with work-related factors. Mary had problems with her son, and Ann perceived social pressures regarding her husband's employment. These problems occurred when both reported experiencing their most intense levels of burnout. It remains unclear whether or not the family problems contributed to their feeling burned out or exacerbated feelings of being burned out that already existed. The family problems may have contributed to physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that was long-term in nature. Maslach (1993) and Pines and Aronson (1988) each emphasized the relationship of these conditions to burnout.

Cummings and Nall (1982, 1983) reported a relationship between perceived supervision style and burnout; that is, school counselors who perceived their administrators to be authoritarian reported being burned out more so than those who perceived their administrators as democratic. In the present study, supervisor behaviors appeared to contribute to feelings of stress and subsequent burnout for both Mary and Ann. On the other hand, Beth reported a helpful relationship with her supervisor. In Beth's case, supervisor style was probably not a contributing burnout factor; however, other possible contributing factors for Beth have been reported. These contrasts suggest that supervisor style may indeed have an impact on burnout. Unfortunately, controlling or influencing supervisor style may be virtually impossible because each supervisor's style is a product of his or her own circumstances. On the other hand, educating supervisors about the influence of their attitudes and behaviors on their subordinates may be beneficial some of the time. The mixed findings about the influence of supervision point out that each individual probably has his or her own specific burnout profile. There are likely to be common elements across individual profiles

Collegial support also seemed to be an important factor. Both Ann and Mary indicated that they lacked support from counseling colleagues and felt isolated in their malaise. Mary recommended something akin to an employee assistance program. Beth reported valuing the contributions of a mentor who helped her deal with feeling burned out. Her positive experience, and the lack of such an experience for both Mary and Ann, suggests that good collegial mentors may contribute to burnout prevention. These findings support the work of Cummings and Nall (1982, 1983) and of Davis, Savicki, Cooley, and Firth (1989) concerning the importance of leadership and supervision styles.

They also reflect Skovholt's (2001) position on viewing burnout as a process that can be interrupted or influenced.

Forney, Wallace-Shutzman, and Wiggers (1982) stated that burnout consists of attitudes and behaviors. Attitudes were characterized by loss of motivation, enthusiasm, and energy. Behaviors were characterized by feelings of exhaustion. Findings in the present study suggest that these attitudes and behaviors may be caused by the personal affect experienced by burned out professionals. All three participants described feelings of being overwhelmed and incompetent, anger, fear, boredom, and sadness. Perhaps burnout attitudes and behaviors are products of negative affect based on unmet needs in an environment that is dysfunctional for the person experiencing burnout.

The three participants were similar in some ways and different in others. The process of becoming burned out followed a linear path for Mary. That is, both internal and external factors gave rise to feeling burned out. The feelings led to a burned out attitude and then to behaviors such as changing jobs. The process was less clear for Ann and Beth. Beth did not experience the depth of feeling burned out that was the case for Mary and Ann. This suggests that a one-solution-for-all response will probably not work. Each individual experiencing burnout appears to have his or her own unique profile of dysfunction in which a number of factors are similar to the profiles of others. Preventing and treating burnout seems to be a multi-faceted challenge.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Although participants were female school counselors, and the findings are limited somewhat by the sample size, the nature of the findings seem applicable to counselors in other settings as well. Several suggestions for professional and employer responses designed to prevent school counselor burnout emerged from the interviews. The counseling profession can provide assistance through conferences and meetings that provide support for counselors and opportunities for networking, by advocacy of efforts to reduce or eliminate time-consuming non-counseling functions, and by educational efforts to help significant others such as supervisors understand the role of the counselor better. Employers are encouraged to provide counselors with effective mentors; to be familiar with the training their counselors received; to understand their counselors' role perceptions; and to eliminate or reduce onerous, time-consuming non-counseling responsibilities.

Skovholt (2001) recommends a self-care action plan for counselors that supports our conclusion that burnout is a multi-faceted challenge. His system leads to a plan for action based on a thorough analysis of internal factors such as one's own other-care/self-care balance and external factors such as the stress level where one works. This supports Baker and Gerler's (2004) strong recommendation that counselors keep up-to-date professionally. Note that Beth engaged in professional activities as a proactive attempt to help her self. The activities engaged in when keeping up-to-date, such as reading professional books and journals and attending workshops and conferences, bring individual counselors in touch with others and their experiences. These contacts will reduce professional isolation that, in turn, may be enhancing the burn out process.

## 6. SUGGESTIONS

Several recommendations for practice emerged from this study. They are: (a) both external and internal factors influence burnout, (b) individuals experiencing burnout may have low professional self-efficacy, (c) supervisor behaviors and attitudes (i.e., style) are important contributing and preventing factors, (d) collegial support can help prevent burnout, (e) individuals experiencing burnout may have their own unique profiles of dysfunction, (f) preventing and treating burnout is a multi-faceted challenge, (g) professional associations and employers can help in prevention and treatment, and (h) counselors can prevent burnout via proactive efforts to take care of themselves physically and emotionally.



The present study was a qualitative, descriptive design. The findings are based on self-report data from interviews of three female volunteers who believed they had experienced burnout, and the accuracy of the data is dependent upon their recollections and integrity. All three participants were women and school counselors, challenging generalization to men and counselors in other settings. Member checks of the transcripts by the three participants enhanced the validity of their data. Although no interview can be free of researcher bias (Maxwell, 1996), the auditor's independent examination of the transcripts provided a reliability check against researcher bias.

Several researchable hypotheses emerged from the present study and are stated herein as questions. Are internal and external factors equally or differentially important in understanding the burnout process? Is the burnout process linear, non-linear or either linear or non-linear? Is the first stage of burnout indicated by negative affect attributable to unmet or unrealized expectations? Does this first stage then lead to manifestations of burnout attitudes and behaviors? Does developing a burnout prevention self-care plan inoculate counseling professionals against burning out? Do each of the prevention strategies recommended herein for professional organizations and employers work either independently or in combination?

Further descriptive research focused on increased understanding of the burnout phenomenon is recommended. Among the possible ways to accomplish this goal are additional phenomenological interview studies of participants who have experienced burnout and surveys designed to discover whether or not the characteristics that have been identified in this study and others are applicable to counselors who have experienced burnout. These studies will expand the sample of individuals who have experienced burnout perhaps with larger and more diverse samples. Continuing efforts to understand the phenomenon are encouraged as the counseling profession is challenged to find ways to prevent, identify, and treat counselor impairment among its members.

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