

Recovered Enough? Evaluating Wellness Among Counsellors and Trainees with Eating Issues

DAYAL, Helena, BA, Med, University of New Brunswick; DOMENE, José F., PhD, University of New Brunswick

Co-Author: WEAVER, Kathryn, RN, PhD

This study consisted of a systematic review of the existing literature on wellness in practitioners who are working with clients with eating issues and also have a history of eating issues themselves. In this context, “eating issue” is defined as abnormal eating habits that involve insufficient or excessive food intake, resulting in detriment to one’s physical and mental health. It encompasses both full and partial eating disorders. Helping professions attract a disproportionate number of individuals with psychopathologies. For example, approximately one in every three or four eating disorder practitioners has an eating disorder history of their own. Research has revealed that there are significantly more psychological and emotional disturbances in Master’s level counsellors-in-training than the general population, suggesting that their ability to counsel others may be impaired. Overidentification, feeling overly responsible for the client, and comparing their own experiences with the client are some of the emotional responses experienced by psychotherapists who have a history of psychiatric hospitalization. Additionally, they may experience anxiety, frustration, reminders of difficult times, isolation, and their ability to be present with the client may be compromised. Alternatively, a personal history with eating issues may help inspire the work of these individuals because they value learning about themselves, which may lead to emotional and professional growth. It also leads to less stigmatizing attitudes, and empathy, which facilitates trust and hope in the therapeutic relationship. There are both advantages and disadvantages to working as a mental health professional when one has a personal history of an eating issue. A contentious issue that has arisen is whether there is a need for a systematic guideline, and what that guideline would entail in order for agencies to determine when one is “recovered enough” from an eating issue to be able to practice as a counsellor. In addition, there is no established protocol for evaluating wellness among counsellors-in-training who may suffer from an eating disorder. The lack of regulations regarding this issue may further encourage secrecy around the topic of eating issues, which is detrimental to the personal health and professional practice of counsellors who are intending to practice with clients who have eating issues. A review of articles in 20 peer reviewed journals on counselling, psychotherapy, mental health, and related fields revealed various challenges that counselling-related practitioners who have personal histories of eating issues experience in their work with clients who have eating issues. These challenges include how this affects their professional practice, personal wellness, and secrecy of their eating issue. Emergent themes included a high precedence of countertransference and overinvolvement in the client’s process, increased chances of relapse, and fear of stigma, which maintained secrecy from supervisors and other colleagues. Implications of these findings for evaluating and promoting practitioner wellness in eating disorder treatment facilities and counsellor education programs will be described, such as implementing self-care courses among counsellor training programs, and implementing a guideline to determine when a counsellor is competent to practice without risk of harm to themselves or others.