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Counselor Emotional Intelligence: A Look at Counselor Impairment Issues and the Importance of Assessment

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Abstract

This article examines the importance of Emotional Intelligence in assessing and managing counselor impairment. The signs and symptoms of counselor impairment, the importance of assessing impairment, and Emotional Intelligence as a way to judge and manage possible impairment are discussed. Emotional Intelligence identifies an individual's ability to look at the emotions of self and others and can, therefore, be used as a tool for the assessment of counselor impairment.

The American Counseling Association (2003) states that counselor impairment includes a considerable negative impact on a counselor's functioning as a professional and may compromise client care and/or pose potential harm to clients. The threat of impaired professionals in the workplace has been an issue for a number of years and has been discussed in several arenas. However, the idea that professionals have a responsibility to assess their impairment and its effects is a relatively new concept. The counseling profession has a special duty to assess these impairments, as a negligent counselor can have an enormous negative impact on his or her clients. Assessing counselor impairment through counselor Emotional Intelligence has become a vital aspect of effective counselor preparation.

Emotional Intelligence became a popular concept in the early 90s with Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (cited in Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). Emotional Intelligence has been defined as "...the ability to monitor and discriminate

the emotions of self and others" (Miville, Carlozzi, Gushue, Schara, & Ueda, 2006, p.153). Recently, the counseling profession has discovered the importance of Emotional Intelligence assessment in managing the effectiveness of professionals. This article discusses the signs and symptoms of counselor impairment, the importance of assessing impairment, and Emotional Intelligence.

Signs and Symptoms of Impairment

The literature has collectively highlighted the signs and symptoms of an impaired counselor to include burnout, depression, temporary emotional imbalance, stress and anxiety, drug and alcohol abuse, exploitation of clients, over-involvement and overwork, and contagion (American Counseling Association, 2003; Emerson & Markos, 1996). Emerson and Markos (1996) have cited burnout as one of the most common occurrences in the counseling profession. Burnout is the counselor's belief of negative self concept, negative job attitudes, loss of client concern, and emotional exhaustion. Some signs and

symptoms of impairment are withdrawing, anxiety, loneliness, unpredictable moods, and apathy towards work. Temporary counselor emotional imbalance can occur due to a personal loss or trauma such as the death of a loved one or rape and requires that the counselor take time off from work to recover. Stress and anxiety symptoms can occur both environmentally and personally. These symptoms include a decreased ability to perform tasks at work (environmental) and low self-esteem (personal) and are found in 83% of psychotherapists (Emerson & Markos, 1996). Over-involvement and overwork may be found in professionals who show feelings of obsession with a client, choose to help one client over others, act in an unprofessional manner, and hope a case will terminate. Some more obvious signs of impairment consist of drug and alcohol abuse, exploitation of clients, and contagion.

Drug and alcohol abuse reveals itself in individuals who have frequent problems with memory, attention, and physical health, prevalent in about 6% to 9% of counseling professionals (Emerson & Markos, 1996). Exploitation of clients can range from engaging in sexual relationships with clients to relying on a client to provide counselor reassurance. Lastly, contagion involves the counselor's over-identification with a disturbed client's skewed view of reality. All of these signs and symptoms, if apparent in a counseling professional, can have a detrimental impact on the client. Therefore, it is vital that professionals are constantly assessing such impairments and reviewing such ethical issues apparent in the profession.

The Importance of Assessment

The impairments previously identified suggest that a counselor who is unable to see or ignore such impairments will be incapable of being an effective

helping professional and may impede or stop client growth. Recognizing the presence of impairment may better promote the positive development of both counselor and client. Some obstacles to recognizing and addressing counselor impairment include the counselor's inability to recognize his or her own problems, the counselor's perception of self and job as a mediator for impairment, the beginning professional's lack of comfort with recognizing weaknesses, and the implementation of only a select number of impairment intervention programs through the American Counseling Association. The American Counseling Association (2003) recognizes that evaluating impairment within oneself and other colleagues and/or supervisors is the responsibility of the counseling profession. Impairment can be assessed by looking at one's Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence reflects the ability of an individual to examine the emotions of self and others and their affect on others. Emotional Intelligence assessment variables include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Miville et al., 2006; Goleman et al., 2002; Pellitteri, Stern, Shelton, & Muller-Ackerman, 2006). The variable of self-awareness is addressed by asking questions such as, "How aware of yourself are you?" and "Do you recognize your strengths and insecurities?" Self-awareness variables take in the ability to assess one's emotions or inner signals and how they affect professional performance, to know one's limitations and strengths, and to look at one's self confidence. Self-management reveals the individual's adaptability, self-control, transparency or authenticity, achievement, initiative, and optimism. Social awareness judges an individual's capability to have empathy for

others, understand the organization of groups, and provide professional service to others. The last variable, relationship management, highlights the individual's ability to inspire others, develop others, be a catalyst for positive change in others, manage conflict, and be a part of a team by collaborating with others. Using these variables as a standard for evaluating professional impairment can be a highly effective tool in managing impairment. Emotional Intelligence examines the key components of self that enable a person to establish effective relationships with others and bring the best out of people which is connected to the ability to empathize and feel emotional concern for others (Pellitteri et al., 2006; Miville et al., 2006). Goleman et al. (2002) assert that Emotional Intelligence contributes 80 to 90% of competencies that differentiate outstanding leaders from those who are average. Lastly, professionals with high levels of Emotional Intelligence are able to assess their own emotional arousal and use self-control in managing the distress of others without allowing it to affect their own emotional stability (Miville et al., 2006; Goleman et al., 2002).

Conclusion

In conclusion, counselor impairment can have damaging effects on the professional's ability to function effectively. The signs and symptoms outlined indicate that there are a number of variables that can have a significant negative impact on the counseling professional. While these signs and symptoms should help alert professionals to impairment, the literature shows that impairment is often not easily recognized and/or ignored. Therefore, it can be argued that the practice of evaluating impairment in the counseling profession should be expected. Counselors who are able to identify their impairments through

assessing their Emotional Intelligence are able to act as competent professionals. Emotional Intelligence is important because it evaluates the characteristics of an effective counseling professional such as self awareness, social awareness, and relationship management. While it may be quite difficult for one to judge his or her impairment and the impairment of other professionals, counselors have an ethical responsibility to do so. It is only when all professionals agree to consider impairment an important issue and become alert to the signs and symptoms and are willing to report cases of impairment, that the counseling profession can uphold its standards of ethical conduct and its ability to positively affect others.

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Sarah Haas is currently a graduate student at Columbus State University pursuing a M.Ed. School Counseling degree. During her time at CSU, she has developed a genuine interest in the effects and issues surrounding counselor impairment and the damage such impairment can have on clients. Through her research, she has found an alarming degree of impairment in the profession and a great need for further research on the issue.