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Working with Children on The Autism Spectrum: Decreasing Job Burnout

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can cause many challenges in a child's life that could affect social skills, behaviors and communication (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Working with Children on the Autism spectrum can add additional stress to a job and often leads to job burnout. Burnout in relation to jobs and careers is described as "prolonged exposure to emotional and interpersonal stressors" (Alessandri et. al, 2018). There are many different careers that strive to help children strengthen these skills or find alternative ways to live with the challenges that they may have such as special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and multiple types of therapists. More specifically, Behavior Technicians often spend many hours with both the child and family within their home environments and are fully immersed in their day to day lives. Though many people pursue these types of careers with the drive to help, many also don't understand the emotional aspect of these careers or how to work through it. Being able to learn how to work through the emotions can help create longevity in the field and avoid experiencing a burnout from the emotional experiences that are attributed to these types of jobs. The culprit of burnout in this field is often emotional exhaustion (Neuman et. al, 1990). Emotional exhaustion can best be explained as "exceeding a person's coping capacity" (Hülshager et. al, 2013). This emphasises the importance of understanding burnout and being knowledgeable on strategies which allow a professional such as a Behavior Technician to manage and prevent emotional exhaustion and burnout. To address the need for education on preventing burnout, I will be providing a workshop to Behavior Technicians who are currently working with children within the field and may need extra support to provide longevity for their career.

Needs Statement

Burnout has impacted various careers and a major field that is affected are those who work with children on the Autism spectrum, such as Behavior Technicians. Burnout can be described as frequent experiences that add stress to an individual's career both emotionally and physically that leads to negative personal and professional outcomes (Alessandri et. al, 2018). Emotional exhaustion is a major factor that leads to burnout for Behavior Technicians. Emotional exhaustion is when a person does not have any more tools or strategies to add additional stress in their lives or they have reached their coping capacity (Hülshager et. al 2013). Burnout presents itself similar to stress. Behavior Technicians have a high level of pressure that can lead to burnout. It is necessary to be educated on burnout in order to best avoid experiencing it as well as being aware of how to cope with it. Educating behavior technicians is crucial to equip them with the tools they need to continue their success and avoid burnout. This section will discuss sources of burnout, symptoms of burnout and strategies to address it, as well as describe the job of a Behavior Technician.

Job burnout can be a result of many different factors within one's personal and professional life. A few of the factors that lead to the diminishing confidence and dedication towards job performance include high demands, lack of resources, pressure and deadlines (Volpone et. al, 2013). These factors make it difficult for people to maintain high hopes for their job's outcomes as well as be able to fully dedicate themselves due to losing their motivation while consistently having these experiences within a workplace. In addition to these factors, when taking on teaching roles, additional factors could include a heavy workload, job changes and a lack of job control. With the addition of these factors there is extra uncertainty created within the work day that can also lead to burnout (Arvidsson et. al, 2019). With the consideration

of these factors in many workplaces employees are likely to experience job burnout without the proper tools and guidance.

Burnout can present itself slightly differently to each person, however there is one factor that is largely contributed to burnout: stress. According to Maroco and Campos (2012), burnout is measured by both the level of fatigue and exhaustion a person experiences. The fatigue and exhaustion come from high levels of stress and pressure within a job. Neuman et. al (1990) further examines burnout and finds a major consequence being emotional exhaustion or the lack of room within oneself to cope with more stress or emotional experiences. Emotional exhaustion can make it difficult for Behavior Technicians to productively continue with their job by lowering their motivation and their capability to work through additional stressful moments. The emotional exhaustion is not only detrimental on it's own but also resulted in a negative relationship in feeling accomplished. This also leads to a lack of involvement and commitment within the organizations (Neuman et. al, 1990). Park and Shin (2020) also states an additional factor that is experienced during burnout as depersonalization. Depersonalization is a factor within stress coping that occurs when someone separates their emotions from themselves (Park & Shin, 2020). People often use this strategy as a coping mechanism in an attempt to avoid adding more stress into their personal lives. All of these factors that contribute to stress within a job can lead to job burnout and prevent longevity in one's career.

In order to best understand the job of those who work with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) such as Behavior Technicians, one needs to understand the wide spectrum that Autism is on. Lord et. al (2018) discusses a range of perspectives of what ASD looks like. It is important to remember that the spectrum is so large and each individual has their own specific needs. However to show the range of Autism some children can be non vocal,

unable to read or even never be able to live on their own (Lord et. al, 2018). On the other end of the spectrum, one may have impaired social perception, atypical information processing and/or even mild levels of delays as those above that can be worked through by adulthood (Lord et. al, 2018) (Lai et. al, 2014). ASD affects many aspects of a child's life and the list of experiences they may face continues to grow with more research. A child with ASD may also be impulsive and experience uncontrollable things such as mood swings, obsessive behaviors, sleep disorders and self-injury (Bangerter et. al, 2017). Though many of the common experiences that people with ASD have been presented within this section unfortunately, the list does not end here and each individual may experience just a few of these traits or many depending on their very specific place on the spectrum. These aspects of ASD contribute to the extra obstacles of their day to day lives as well as those who support them.

Behavior Technicians have a very unique role when working with a team to provide applied behavior analysis (ABA) to children with ASD. Oftentimes, Behavior Technicians provide sessions within a clients home and spend multiple hours per day with each child. Under the supervision of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) Behavior Technicians target specific skills that a child may need to strengthen and run different types of trials that include prompting (Lerman et. al, 2018). A trial would be one attempt at teaching a goal. For example, if the goal is to clap hands a Behavior Technician would say "do this" while clapping hands. The prompting will continue to change as the child grows and learns, so a prompt in this situation may be a physical prompt where the Behavior Technician claps the child's hands for them until they understand what is being asked of them. As previously mentioned in this section, ASD is a very wide spectrum therefore the behaviors that are being taught within these trials are dependent on the needs of each child. The behaviors that Behavior Technicians work on with children with

ASD are not those that come easy to the child. Due to this unpreferred behaviors such as aggression and tantruming are likely to occur during a session. Behavior Technicians will be addressing all of the aspects of a child's life that needs extra support in relation to their ASD in a similar way as mentioned above. Due to a child constantly changing and learning, the specifics of the job are changing along with them.

The constant changes of the job as well as the emotional toll of pushing a child to learn even when it creates unpreferred behaviors lead to burnout within the field. The aspects of working as a Behavior Technician can contribute to a negative relationship with the job as well as result in job turnover. When an employee becomes burnt out they are likely to leave the employment. As mentioned earlier in this section, burnout can lead to lower motivation and less satisfaction with a job. Turnover rates within the field can be as high as 77% per year. In addition to turnover rates affecting the number of employees within a company, these can result in a larger work load for the rest of the employees (Novack & Dixon, 2018). High work load or high demands can increase the pressure and stress to the remaining employees further contributing to job burnout.

Although burnout can greatly affect one's professional life there are strategies that people can benefit from to improve their mindset during this time. Cancio (2018) discusses one of the major strategies to cope with stress and/or burnout. It is important that behavior technicians don't isolate themselves in their feelings when overly stressed or approaching burnout . Cancio (2018) recommends reaching out to friends, family and co-workers and finds that this is extremely helpful to those who experience burnout (Cacio 2018). Brittle (2020) recommends changing the stressful situations by focusing on problem solving behaviors rather than focusing on detaching oneself from the situation. In addition, Boujet (2016) added that those who were competently

trained in the field had better coping strategies such as emotion focused coping and also agreed that peer support was crucial in coping with the field and preventing burnout. Emotion focused coping is a strategy where people work on seeing the positive in a situation as a way to better control their emotions.

Additional strategies have been recommended to help prevent burnout even further. These include self-care, reflection and structure. Self-care in relation to burnout is highly focused around getting enough sleep. Jobs that require an employee to be available at all times of the day can create job burnout (Genly 2016). Although Behavior Technicians work a specific schedule, parents often are able to contact their child's Behavior Technician to make schedule changes, update on behaviors or to ask questions about a session. Reflection is also extremely important as a mindfulness strategy having self awareness and taking the time to truly understand the experiences at work can allow for a more comprehensive understanding of one's own emotions and allows for mindfulness (Genly 2016). Mindfulness also reduces stress to better prevent burnout. Lastly, structure within the job is important to be able to maintain longevity in the career. Structure in the workplace greatly focuses on multitasking. Multitasking can be difficult for many people and without the proper organization while accomplishing multiple tasks at once one can become stressful (Genly 2016). Learning how to multitask in an organized way rather than just taking on many projects is also important in preventing burnout.

This capstone project will address the demands of a behavior technician, educate employees on ASD, inform employees on burnout as well as provide strategies to prevent burnout. This will be done with a three part, one day workshop where those who work in the field or are interested in working in the field are able to attend. The purpose of this workshop is to educate people on the field and to teach the skills needed in order to create longevity as a

Behavior Technician. This workshop is needed because with the high turnover rates in the field the caseload is becoming large for those who remain and this can result in even more people being burned out.

Theory

The Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) is a theory created by Hobfoll (1988) that focuses on resources and losses in relation to stress and emotional exhaustion, both of which are major contributors to burnout (Halbesleben et. al, 2014). The resources can be gained through experiences and are not necessarily tangible. Resources can be lessons that have been learned in order to strengthen one's capacity for the next similar experience. According to Halbesleben et. al (2014) a loss of resources is likely to end in job burnout. With this theory one can invest in their resources by gaining coping strategies in order to be better prepared for emotional or stressful situations in the future. People may have resources that aren't necessarily valuable such as having a poor coping mechanism, which is why it is important to gain resources that can best help in a stressful situation such as strong coping skills. As previously mentioned this theory is a scale of resources and losses. The losses in this theory would translate to workplace struggles or stressors within the job. However, with strong resources the losses will not outweigh the capacity of resources an individual holds to cope with these situations (Halbesleben et. al, 2014).

This theory directly relates to the job as a behavior technician and helps understand how to prevent burnout. By building up resources through learning coping strategies such as those within this workshop, the behavior technician is able to be prepared to experience the "losses" within the job. This also highlights the importance of having strong and effective coping strategies as well. For example, depersonalization would be a resource for a behavior technician but it would not be a strong resource. Due to the lack of strength of the resource the loss will be

able to outweigh the resources the employee has leading to burnout. Overall, this theory stresses the importance of being educated on healthy ways to cope with job stress in order to prevent experiencing burnout.

Consideration of Diversity Section

In the field of special education there is a large range of diverse people being served similarly to Behavior Technicians. Both fields strive towards a common goal and have similar aspects of diversity within them. However, according to data USA 77% of special education teachers are white (Special Education Teachers). Due to this I would expect that the majority of people who will attend the presentation would be white. In addition, 85.6% of special education teachers are female. This statistic is also likely to present itself in the outcome of those who attend the presentation on burnout. I would expect the majority of those in attendance to be female. Due to the demands of the job it is likely that many people who attend will have an entry level college education such as an associates degree or working towards a degree, because a job in the field will require a degree in higher level positions. Behavior technicians usually make their way to become a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) which will require a Master's degree. Due to this I would expect that those in attendance would be working towards their degree or newly graduated this allows for a diverse outcome of ages ranging from 18-25.

Learning Outcomes

At the completion of the courses participants will be able to:

1. Identify the 3 sources of job burnout.
2. Recognize 5 symptoms of ASD.
3. Indicate 3 Strategies to address job burnout.

This will be measured by a survey at the end of the course.

Method

Participants

The location of this presentation will be in Orange, California at the Children's Learning Connection Offices. It is expected that 10 participants will attend the presentation. These participants are likely to be employees of Children's Learning Connection and will likely be mostly female. The participants can have a range of education, however, it is assumed that those newly entering the field are most likely to attend this workshop, therefore the participants are likely to be college students. Many jobs working with children with ASD have employees with a wide range of socioeconomic statuses, many different languages spoken and is not a job that requires a specific gender. I expect the outcome of participants at the presentation will be very diverse.

Procedures

Section 1 will present an overview on what burnout is. A powerpoint presentation will be used for the audience to follow the curriculum see Appendix A for the powerpoint slides. In the first section titled "Introduction" the powerpoint will state the definition of emotional exhaustion and how it leads to burnout. It will also introduce why emotional exhaustion and burnout are important to be knowledgeable about what it is and how to identify it. For example, it will be mentioned that burnout can be felt when one feels they have no more room within their capacity to cope with stressful situations. This section will wrap up with a brief overview of the presentation for section one and will lead into an open discussion amongst the participants in the workshop.

Section 2 will go into more detail about burnout. This will address symptoms like detaching oneself emotionally from possibly a very emotional job. The presentation will give

examples of situations such as a child who is visibly having a very difficult time with therapy. This can be a very emotional situation and if someone notices that they are trying to block their emotions it may lead to burnout. Other symptoms such as lack of motivation and job turnover will be addressed as well. Section 2 will end with an overview of multiple symptoms that someone may recognize in the workforce and specifically some that may come with working with children with ASD.

Section 3 will quickly begin with an overview of the past two days' curriculum. With the acknowledgement of what burnout is and what symptoms may be presented, day 3 will address coping strategies. Coping strategies include finding a way to work through the emotions and using it to better yourself in the field rather than dissociating with the feeling that arises. Other strategies for helping avoid burnout is to create balance and reach out to peers, family and coworkers for advice. At the end of section 3 a brief overview of the entire curriculum will be presented. This workshop will also allow for networking and connections may be built in order to aid in the ability to reach out to someone for help or support.

Results

I could not implement my project due to COVID-19. Therefore I do not have a results section.

Discussion

I could not implement my project due to COVID-19. Therefore I do not have a discussion section

Resources

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Appendix

Appendix A.


Working with Children on The Autism Spectrum: Decreasing Job Burnout

California State University, Monterey Bay
Desirae Vargas

Introduction
Burnout: Prolonged exposure to emotional and interpersonal stressors
Behavior Technicians: A clinical position where an employee works with children on the Autism Spectrum.

What do Behavior Technicians Do?

- Trials of behaviors etc. "Do this" while a Behavior Technician shapes hands
- Work on strategies to help prevent unpreferred behaviors



Needs Statement

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

- ASD is a very large spectrum. Some areas that can be impacted are social skills, behaviors and communication.

What are these jobs?

- Working hands on with children with ASD to teach them life skills, curriculum or skills to strengthen physical abilities.

Needs Statement Continued

Special educators often have jobs that could be very emotionally demanding.

- Unpreferred situations- tantrums
- Aggression
- Slow progress

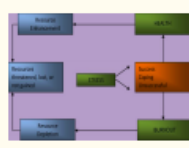
What are the implications of burnout and emotional exhaustion on the job?

- Lower motivation
- Job turnover
- Dedication and passion towards the job

Theory

Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) - Dr. Stevan E. Hobfoll (1989)

- This theory is related to stress/emotional exhaustion is centered around the motivation to protect oneself (Westman et. al.)
- Workplace struggles translate to losses



Learning Outcomes


I designed a workshop on emotional exhaustion and burnout for a group of special educators. It focuses on the learning outcomes listed below.

1. Identifying the sources of burnout and emotional exhaustion.
2. Recognizing symptoms/behaviors of Autism Spectrum Disorder.
3. Indicate strategies to address emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Methods: Location/Participants

This workshop will be held at the Children's Learning Connection offices in Orange, California.


Sociodemographic: Although this field can be very diverse, the majority of people in the field of special education are primarily white. In addition, the demographics in the area of Orange, California is predominantly white.



Methods: Participants

Education level: Education level can vary, but will have a minimum of a high school diploma for entry level positions.

Age: Entry level can begin at 18 and can range to about 25 years of age on average.



Workshop Part 1: Intro to Behavior Technicians and ASD

What is the job of a behavior technician?

- Working with children with ASD and supporting their learning through applied behavior analysis.

What is ASD?

- Autism Spectrum Disorder affects the development of a child. This can affect social skills, behaviors and communication.


Workshop Part 2: Burnout

What causes burnout?

- Pressure
- Deadlines
- Emotional Exhaustion


What effects does burnout have?

- Job turnover
- Lower motivation
- Difficulty processing additional stressful situations



Workshop Part 3: Strategies

- Work through the emotion
- Reach out for support
- Use the emotions for a positive impact in your job
- Do not dissociate
- Self-care



Results and Discussion

Results and Discussion

- I could not implement my project due to COVID-19. Therefore I do not have a results or discussion section.
- The workshop that I would be having will give Behavior Technicians the opportunity to gain coping skills to prevent burnout. This will allow for longevity in the field.

Questions?

