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Mental Health in Substance Abuse Clinics: Illuminating the Importance of Mental Health in the
Behavioral Health and Human Services Field

Janette Amezcua Alcalá

Valley Health Associates and La Tonya

Collaborative Health & Human Services

Department of Health Human Services and Public Policy

California State University Monterey Bay

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Author Note

Janette Amezcua, Department of Health Human Services and Public Policy, California State
University Monterey Bay. This research was supported by Valley Health Associates

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Name, California State University
Monterey Bay, 100 Campus Center, Seaside, CA, 93955. Contact: 29janette99@gmail.com

Abstract

Behavioral healthcare work is difficult. This can be seen in the high turnover rates in the field, including at Valley Health Associates, a substance abuse clinic in Monterey County. In an effort to address the high turnover rates, a pilot program was launched, applying what other companies are doing to improve not only work productivity but mindfulness in the workplace. While the results received were not what was anticipated, it was an excellent learning experience. The gravity of not addressing burnout is a continual cycle that, if nothing changes, will inevitably continue or possibly worsen over time. It is recommended that all behavioral health care clinics prioritize the mental health of the workers serving their community.

Agency/Community Served

Valley Health Associates is an addiction recovery center that serves adults. They offer programs for people who are at risk or are currently facing a substance abuse disorder by providing a variety of services. The services include counseling services, medicated assisted treatment programs, family/ group therapy, education services, and food drives. Valley Health Associates' mission statement is to provide the highest quality substance use disorder services for youth and adults in Monterey and San Benito County. Unfortunately, the exact number of people who utilize their services is unknown. The youth outpatient executive director mentioned that the number of adults is well above the 100s, but for the youth, there are unfortunately only six active cases. It is important to note that while there is no supporting evidence on the exact number of cases because Valley Health Associates does not have an annual report log, we can make the comparison to the demographics of Monterey County as a whole. As of now, there is an epidemic of opioids alone facing Monterey County.

A fairly recent study by Dr. Ignacio Navarro, Dr. Kim Judson, DrPH, and Karen Pacheco Silva focussed on a two-year preliminary evaluation report. The purpose of the study was to address the unmet need for more SUD programs, specialty mental health services, and supportive services. Knowing that we do not have enough of these services already and by looking at the demographics of people in Monterey County who have addiction issues, we can make the correlation that VHA must have an outstanding number of patients. In California, more than 3,200 patients died in 2019 due to opioid-related overdose. California is currently in the process of expanding its MAT program, which is its medicated assisted treatment plan which is a mixture of FDA-approved medication, counseling services, and behavioral therapies (Navarro, 2019).

Problem Definition/Description

Nationwide the concern that current challenges with behavioral health workers, which include substance abuse counselors, is the high stress/ burnout levels which evidently lead to turnover. There are shortages in retention and not enough training for the behavioral health workforce. While the demands for retention and training are similar, substance abuse counselors have slightly lower requirements than mental health counselors. In the case of substance abuse counselors and the substance abuse field, there has been a shift in regard to how to assist their patients better. Those shifts include increasing public financing, increased medicated assisted treatments, higher emphasis on evidence-based practices, and the use of peer support specialists. Valley Health does offer services that fit with the shift that other substance abuse clinics are doing; however, the minimal amount of staff at Valley Health Associates has left the clinic at risk for burnout and high turnover rates.

Contributing Factors to the Problem

A contributing factor to the potentially high turnover rate for substance abuse counselors is burnout. Studies have shown that in the substance-abuse treatment data, the annual turnover rate is from 19% to 50%. This longitudinal study of annual turnover reported that the provided data for the study was over a two-year lifespan from 2008 to 2009. During this time, the annual turnover for clinical supervisors was 23.4% and 33.2% for counselors. There were a number of reasons why the turnover rate was so large between these two groups; However, the common reason behind the turnover rate was typically due to a new job or opportunity (Lilian T, 2010). Other studies, on the other hand, showed that a contributing factor to the turnover rate is due to emotional exhaustion. This study done in 2007 found that more than 1800 substance-abuse treatment counselors were given a survey to analyze the reasons for their terminating their job. Exhaustion was the top response, followed by low autonomy and a lack of workplace justice (J. Ducharme Lori, 2007).

Consequences of the Problem

Based on the studies of the contributing factors, some of the consequences for these turnover rates are affecting the clients themselves. Clients cannot build strong and trustworthy relationships with their counselors as they have to switch to a new person every few months. 2-3 consequences of the problem are explained fully using reliable data. This consequence can be counterbalanced by another recent study showing that addiction recovery patients experienced self-stigma and shame based on stereotypes in a public space. This process can lead to an identity crisis, negative stigmatization stereotypes, and overall just cause some of these addiction recovery patients to have possible mental health issues. This is extremely important to consider

because if there is such a high turnover rate, these clients will not be able to have a reliable person to express how their mental health is affecting them. This, unfortunately, creates a cycle of patients suppressing their mental health possibly and new counselors being unable to connect with their clients because of their clients' past. This can cause frustration from the counselor, which further pushes the lack of support (Mathews, 2019).

Possible Capstone Projects

The capstone project that I had in mind was how can I incorporate some kind of training that is as equally as important as the training of behavioral health workers to provide clients optimal support. I have always been avid in becoming an advocate for the importance of mental health, as it is crucial for everyday life. Considering how emotionally demanding any behavioral health work is, I wanted a project that focused on caring for the workers that care for our communities.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Exhaustion	High Turnover rates in Substance Abuse counselors	Unable to connect with client
Toxic work environment		Higher case load
New job offers		Burnout

Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is to help reduce possible stress in the workplace. The goal of this project is to prevent a domino effect of challenges and future problems a worker might face due to high levels of stress. Understanding stress does not necessarily have to arise in the workplace; it can often be stress due to other environmental or personal factors. This affects

multiple things in the workplace, from job performance to overall job satisfaction. The project I am planning to implement will target two main components that have been shown to have positive effects in the workplace. The two are meditation and positive reinforcement. For the meditation aspect, I plan on using breathing techniques and words of encouragement and or affirmation.

A study by Positive Psychology in their article titled “Positive Reinforcement in the Workplace” considered the following answers from employees when asked about positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement encourages growth, offers excellent benefits, boosts workers and their satisfaction, and reduces turnover rates. They also noted that letting people bring the dogs raises employee satisfaction and lower stress levels. In addition, positive recognition promoted employee engagement, and having optimistic management styles helped with employee performance. The well-known app called Headspace is intended to help do a quick meditation by guiding individuals through the exercise. Meditate said that meditating at work can reduce stress and frustration and encourage focus, energy, compassion, and productivity. The app Headspace also showed four benefits of meditating in the workspace. The number one being was that there is less stress. A study in 2018 showed that people who used their app for ten days reported an 11% decrease in stress. A second reason for the benefits of meditating in the workspace is that there would be more focus and productivity. Their research showed that 15-minute sessions of meditation resulted in a 22% reduction in mind wandering and increased their daily focus by 14%. The third reason is that there was easier teamwork, and finally, their job satisfaction and engagement improved (Emmerson, 2020).

Project Implementation

The project will be fairly simple but with a few moving parts that will need to happen every week. This month-long project will have two components. The plan is to set aside 15-20 minutes on Mondays and Wednesdays. Mondays will be called Affirmation Mondays, and I plan to have a bulletin board where everyone will need to leave a message for each other. These messages will be positive and can be read throughout the week. These words of encouragement and positivity, I believe, will set a positive tone for the work week. On Wednesday, I will ask everyone to set aside time, join a Zoom meeting and meditate with me through a guided meditation for 15-20 minutes. Wednesdays are an excellent time to have a breather as it's halfway through the week, and things can begin to get hectic or a bit stressful. I plan on having all workers participate in the activities for the best results.

My plan to track the success of this will be to conduct a small survey at the beginning of the project and the end. The survey will have a few questions about participants' stress at the beginning, and the survey at the end will ask how the activities helped them with their stress levels. My resources will either come from myself, or I will use the resources already provided at my internship site. Here are the steps broken down into a small timeline:

1. Gather appropriate questions and build a survey with my mentor that can be asked anonymously amongst the workers at Valley Health
2. Get materials and build the bulletin board while I send out the survey
3. Have a small meeting explaining the purpose of this project and discuss what times works for the activities

4. Have a month-long ongoing project while recording people who participate in both the board and the meditation
5. During the said month, collect follow-up questions about their progress
6. Send out the survey at the end of the project
7. Compare data

Assessment Plan

This will be a quantitative study that will rely on comparing data from surveys. The service that will be compared will be at the beginning and end of the project. The best way to get results will be to take note of how many people are participating in the actual activities and making sure that the data matches. The best way to have a good outcome measure will be to have an initial survey that checks the overall stress levels of the participants. This will be helpful in determining if there need be any modifications in the activities based on any triggers or circumstances where the stress levels may not be as high as anticipated; therefore, we can reduce to one activity.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes of this project were to reduce the overall stress levels that the office might have with its workers but have this be a prolonged solution to reduce stress levels. It is hard to determine whether this project may benefit my internship site. However, it is my strong belief that words of encouragement and meditation in any workplace are beneficial for its workers, whether they are stressed out or not. I believe the expected outcomes in the near future will be better productivity at work and workers will have a better relationship with their work/personal life balance. With that being said, my personal expected outcome is that there are

stress levels within the workplace, and the meditation and words of encouragement project that I plan to enforce in the workplace will benefit its workers. This will build better relationships among workers as the words of encouragement will not necessarily come from a single person but rather from multiple coworkers. This will set a great mindset to start the week on a Monday, which is why I chose to do it at the beginning of the week. And workers having a pause with the meditation exercise halfway through the week will feel less burnt out and stressed.

Project Results

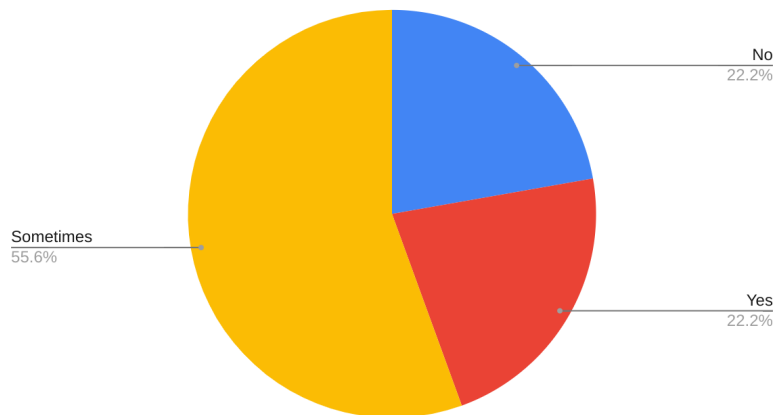
The purpose of my project was to incorporate mindfulness into the workspace by following a few activities. My initial activities were to have a vision board that would consist of affirmations that everyone could go and interact with. This idea, however, was not plausible as a few workers were not always in the office as they had to go into the field and provide services like outreach. The only activity that seemed the most effective and easy to deliver was the meditation exercise. This activity was intended to be measured throughout February.

Unfortunately, due to external factors, it was reduced to a week-long project in the month of March. During this week, I would send out a daily meditation video that each staff member would do individually at their convenience. Each meditation session lasted approximately 10-12 minutes and were researched intensely as some meditation videos were religiously based.

Research on each video had to be done prior to me sending out the video. The very first activity was for the staff at Valley Health to answer a short six-question survey.

The expected outcomes of my project were based on the survey results. The questionnaire results were going to help both with the activities I was going to proceed with and the follow-up questionnaire after the activities were completed. My results found commonality in their weekly feelings, which included trouble with sleep, stress, and fatigue. A little over 50% of staff practiced self-care, while 11.1% of staff did not practice self-care at all. Another commonality I found was that when it came to de-stressing a lot of the activities that people were doing in order to distress were physical. These activities included walks, exercising, painting, and reading. A few other activities worth mentioning were, attending 12-step meetings and self-pampering. When answering the question, “Where does your mental health affect you,” a critical 37.5% of participants answered, “work.” The following chart was one that I wanted to incorporate with the meditations in the office.

Do you meditate?



Based on the questionnaire, my research was going to be based on a causal research project. By first identifying my cause and effect, I was quickly able to find my independent variable, which was work, and my dependent variable, which was stress. In order to find the relationship between the two, I applied the meditations to the workspace to see if my controlled variable, which was my meditations, would ultimately affect work productivity and overall workers' well-being. When sending out the daily meditations for the week of March, I had participants answer the following questions; "How did you feel before, during, and after the meditation?" Unfortunately, I was not able to get any participants in this study. Facing this problem, I figured there were a number of reasons why this could have been.

My first theory was that on my end, I could have scheduled meetings with individuals instead of simply sending an email with the meditation. While I tried to be mindful of everyone's time and the caseload each individual worker and counselor had, I believe that not getting any results were, in an odd way, the exact results I was looking for. The importance of mental health in places like Valley Health is where it is crucial to prioritize. It is because I did not have any participants take at least 15 minutes away from their day-to-day work, which highlights how demanding their job is. Looking at the early signs of the possibility of workers experiencing burnout, I feel like strictly implementing some sort of mindfulness into their workspace is important now more than ever. While I did not get the results I had anticipated for my outcome, I can confidently say that through this learning experience, I hope to bring light to a problem not only facing Valley Health Associates but other behavioral health agencies. The gravity of the lack of mental health mindfulness at jobs with the most emotionally demanding roles is going to be a continual cycle that, if nothing changes, will continue or possibly worsen over time.

Conclusion & Recommendations

While the results received were not the ones anticipated, there was a learning experience gained from the results. There are three main recommendations that the agency should consider in order to succeed with the mental well-being of their healthcare workers. As mentioned earlier, the entire state of California is facing an epidemic of drugs. Knowing this piece of information is on top of the fact that Monterey County does not have a large number of agencies that are caring for people who are dealing with addiction. What was mainly learned from the experience was that because there were substantial reasons as to why no results were received in the anticipated manner, getting no results from the actual implementation was the data. As no one was, unfortunately, able to make taking to do the 10-minute meditation on their own time highlighted the fact that workers at Valley Health Associates were prioritizing their work and mayhaps did not have time. While the meditation practice was intended only to make workers set aside 10 minutes to prioritize their mental health, the workers at this agency were more than likely prioritizing their clients or other office duties. Prioritizing their clients is definitely at the top of a behavioral health care worker's role in their job; However, leading to recommendations for this agency and future agencies is to prioritize the mental health of their workers.

While trying to implement daily medications may not be a realistic timeline at this time for the agency, there are other ways this company can show interest in the mental health of their workers well being. For example, holding staff meetings where the workers are provided with resources to help them prioritize their well-being outside of work. Another example might be having more companies get together like picnics or outings to possibly help those workers whose outside life does not allow them to reach out for the services. This should be taking what you

learned in your project results and the implementation process to provide recommendations to the agency. Finally, the last recommendation is to implement the affirmation board; being recognized for a person's hard work at their job goes a long way for behavioral healthcare workers who constantly go above and beyond for their clients. A little recognition goes a long way in not only their work environment but someone's personal life as well. Being told thank you for your hard work/even showing up may cheer someone who could be dealing with stress, anxiety, depression, or even a personal dilemma.

Personal Reflection

I learned a lot more than I intended to in the process of this capstone project, not only with working at the agency itself but doing research on substance abuse clinics. I found it amazing that I was personally writing and referencing a research paper that was done by professors from CSUMB, especially professors in my department. I feel I had very biased reasoning as to why people at Valley Health Associates were not doing the meditation practices. Last semester when I worked at Valley Health Associates, I saw how quickly the agency filters through workers who either leave due to reasons. Or from personal conversations knowing that they leave because Valley health associates is simply not a right fit for them due to the work environment and the immense amount of work. Knowing this already that a handful of workers were not pleased with the way Valley Health treated them as workers and gave them too much work. I thought I was an intern coming in and telling them to take time away from that work.

Which could've possibly impacted their timeline of when they have to submit things or even feel like my work was not that important. And again, looking at the job reviews for Valley Health, my biased perspective on the job environment was that it was not prioritizing its workers.

That is why when I was choosing a capstone project, I wanted something that would prioritize not only them as workers but as people. The project's planning process was a lot of trial and error because the original plan was to check in with the workers about their personal feelings about the job agency. But there were limitations, especially with HR. Another issue I ran into while doing this project was that communication on both ends was a challenge. I had a personal reason for working remotely at the job site this semester, which alone comes with its own list of challenges. Additionally, communication from workers at Valley Health was minimal as my emails were probably either not prioritized or lost in the amount of work that workers do for the agency.

My strings, on the other hand, I believe, were having one-on-one conversations with the workers the few times that I did, and I was able to gather some of their needs and build the questionnaire /survey. I had to have the survey double-checked by my mentor a couple of times before I was actually able to send it to the rest of the staff. And despite me not being able to get the entire staff to complete the survey, the ninth workers did highlight the issue that I was trying to solve. I was able to see in writing how some of the workers at Valley health associates were feeling, what they were currently doing to help with that, and what they wished they could do to improve it. I think that looking at numbers based on the questions that I had sent out mentally prepared me for my future. Again, I am going into a workforce that is very mentally demanding, and I need to have some sort of preparation in order to take care of my mental health and well-being.

My challenge was definitely trying to get everyone on board and actually complete the capstone project with me. My original idea was meant to be recorded for a month-long back in March, and in the month of April, I was supposed just to be looking at the data and finishing up

my capstone paper. It was extremely difficult. Again, I had to get multiple things approved by my mentor prior to sending it out to the workers at Valley Health Associates. And once all of that was approved, it was still a challenge trying to get everyone to either complete the survey or participate in any of the activities that I had mentioned either in person or in the email that was attached to the survey for Valley Health associate workers to complete. Additional challenges included communication remotely from my side and primarily from their side. Understandably, so I fully understood why perhaps they weren't able to do the survey or constantly check in with me about my capstone.

A border health issue that I believe relates to the project that I was addressing in a small but crucial way is that this agency is showing early signs of burnout for their workers. Clearly, they are having and experiencing high levels of turnover rates. I, unfortunately, do believe that because the environment at Valley Health Associates is very demanding of their workers. It will be difficult in the future to keep workers. And this in no way is at the fault of no one, nor the issue with substance abuse clinics. But based on my research, I realize that already the state of California, specifically Monterey County, does not have a lot of resources for people who are experiencing addiction. And looking at the demographics and knowing that there is a high volume of people within our county that are experiencing addiction and other drug-related issues, naturally, the ratio of workers to clients is going to be very high. I believe that what should be prioritized before even trying to get more workers is to have more funding for not only Valley Health Associates but other substance abuse clinics. I believe that there should be more funding for the training of substance abuse counselors. And I think that there should be a demand for

better benefits for these workers, as there is a limited number of them that are providing services for a vast majority of the population who are in need of these services.

I think some advice that I would give future students that are working at my agency is two: Definitely have a stern form of communication. I think I was very timid and almost afraid to make a position for myself at the agency as an intern. While I was definitely given a position as an intern working for the agency, I think that I was not as direct as I should have been when being an intern that was working on a capstone project. I believe there was a fine line between work that was beneficial for the agency versus work that was focused on my school. I personally believe that this agency is probably not an ideal internship site to work on and complete hours for. I think that my biased perspective aside, I can simply state that this agency currently has a number of dilemmas that have to be fixed before they have student interns. As I mentioned previously, I know for a fact that substance-abuse clinics currently are very limited, and despite needing help from interns, I think they primarily need a little bit more funding and a solid plan for their workers. I only say this because when I was interning there, I felt like I was learning things, but I was learning them in a form that I felt a sense of responsibility for the agency, and not because I was trying to gain knowledge for my field. And by responsibility, I mean the pressure of completing certain tasks as an intern, yet feeling like not completing them somehow in my mind made me think that I was going to lose my “job.” I was sharing the pressure that workers were fuming, despite me only being an intern.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines
Creating a plan	I would send out a survey that would tell me what the staff is currently experiencing in regards to stress.	March 22, 2023
Sending out a survey	Sending the survey to everyone currently employed at Valley health associates	March 23, 2023
Create activities based on results	Once received the survey the activity decided on were having meditations incorporated into their work life	March 24th, 2023
Planning out Meditations	I emailed the entire staff once more to try and find a timeframe where everyone can join through guided	March 24th, 2023
Meditation Implementation	Sent out a Daily Meditation video for everyone to watch once a day for a total of 5 days	March 27th-March 30th
Results	Gather the results of everyone who participated before sending out the final survey	April 1st
Compare Data	After sending out the post survey, compare data from the pre meditation surveys	April 1st