

Compassion fatigue in mental health counselor

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Abstract. Empathy fatigue is a common psychological problem among mental health professionals, especially counselors. Based on several literatures, this paper explores the effects of empathy type, self-efficacy, level of mindfulness and mental well-being on empathy fatigue. Research suggests that excessive emotional engagement, especially negative or self-directed empathy, can exacerbate emotional exhaustion, while positive experiences of empathy and higher self-efficacy contribute to occupational adaptability and emotional resilience. In addition, the article also focuses on the global empathy fatigue and cultural differences, and proposes intervention strategies such as psychological education, emotional regulation training, occupational boundary setting and professional support to alleviate empathy fatigue and promote the sustainable career development of psychological counselors.

1. Introduction

Counselors play a crucial role in the mental health system by building trusting relationships with clients through Empathy-Based Therapy, helping patients identify, understand, and regulate their emotions. However, long-term, high-intensity Empathic engagement with high-intensity can have profound effects on Counselors themselves, including emotional exhaustion, job burnout, Compassion Fatigue (CF), and may even lead to professional bias and ethical dilemmas. Studies have shown that counselors may experience Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) and on the professional level due to excessive empathy, which may affect the objectivity of their decision making. In addition, emotional overload may lead to emotional numbness, affecting the counselor's psychological resilience and professional judgment. Therefore, the study of psychological challenges of psychological counselors under empathy therapy and its impact on professionalism not only helps to understand the psychological burden of the helping profession, but also provides theoretical support and practical guidance for developing effective coping strategies and enhancing professional sustainability.

Research has shown that empathy is not a single concept but is composed of cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy refers to the counselor's rational understanding of the client's feelings without being directly involved in the client's emotions, while emotional empathy involves the counselor empathizing with the client's emotions and

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even experiencing similar emotional states. In a previous study, researchers explored the role of cognitive empathy in psychological counseling [1]. Research has shown that cognitive empathy acts as an emotional protective barrier during counseling, helping counselors avoid being overly immersed in understanding their clients' pain, thereby maintaining professional distance. In contrast, emotional empathy can enhance the emotional connection between the counselor and the client, but if overused, it can lead to emotional exhaustion, burnout and psychological burden. The study found that counselors who tended to use cognitive empathy more effectively managed their emotional states and were more likely to experience less empathy fatigue when faced with emotionally stressful cases. Therefore, the study emphasizes that the training of cognitive empathy should be strengthened in the training process of psychological counselors to help counselors protect their mental health while providing effective counseling.

On the other hand, researchers further explored the psychological challenges that mental health professionals may face in high-intensity empathic work [2]. The study found that compassion fatigue caused by long-term empathy is highly correlated with STS, which not only affects the emotional regulation of counselors, but may also impair their long-term professional adaptability. The study further analyzed three common coping strategies: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. Problem-oriented coping, in which counselors reduce empathic burdens by upgrading professional skills, seeking professional supervision, and improving counseling skills, is considered one of the most effective strategies. Emotionally oriented coping involves managing stress through meditation, exercise and counseling. Studies have shown that problem-oriented and emotion-oriented strategies help reduce compassion fatigue, while avoidance strategies (such as reduced empathic engagement and deliberate emotional withdrawal) may lead to increased burnout.

These two studies reveal the dual impact of counselors in empathy therapy: empathy is a core skill for building effective therapeutic relationships, but excessive emotional empathy can lead to empathy fatigue and burnout, which can affect clinical decision-making and occupational adaptability. Therefore, how to balance empathy and professional distance has become an urgent problem for mental health practitioners.

This study aims to explore the negative effects of empathy therapy on counselors and its mechanisms. Empathy is a key tool for building trusting relationships, but counselors may experience emotional exhaustion, empathy fatigue and burnout in a long-term high-intensity empathic environment, and even face ethical dilemmas, especially counselors who over-rely on emotional empathy are more susceptible to their patients' emotions, which increases their psychological burden and further affects their professional judgment. In addition, research has shown that cognitive empathy and affective empathy play different roles in the counseling process. Therefore, this paper will analyze the negative effects of different types of empathy on the psychological state and professional performance of counselors and reveal the reasons.

2. Compassion fatigue, burnout, and relevant factors in mental health providers

2.1 The nature of empathic fatigue

CF refers to the emotional and psychological exhaustion psychologists experience from prolonged exposure to the pain and trauma of others. As professionals who have dealt with

the emotional and psychological trauma of others for a long time, counselors are particularly vulnerable to empathy fatigue. Empathy fatigue can not only affect the personal mental health of counselors, but also affect their career development and work performance, leading to emotional exhaustion, cognitive bias and job burnout. Research shows that counselors in the early stages of their careers, in particular, are more likely to suffer from empathy fatigue because they lack effective emotional regulation skills and coping mechanisms. Excessive emotional involvement may cause them to lose interest in work or even feel unable to cope with high-intensity emotional labor and eventually trigger job burnout.

According to a study of 109 private psychologists in China, factors such as educational background, supervisory experience, years of employment, and monthly casework volume all have a significant impact on the level of empathy fatigue [3]. The results show that the level of empathy fatigue of psychological counselors with low education is significantly higher than that of counselors with high education. In addition, consultants with supervision experience can maintain a better psychological balance and avoid excessive emotional consumption when facing high-intensity emotional labor. On the contrary, counselors who lack supervision experience tend to fall into emotional fatigue and find it difficult to manage their emotions effectively.

The study also found that counselors with fewer years of service (0-5 years) were more likely to feel emotionally exhausted than those with more experience (6-10 years or more), especially at the beginning stage of the job, due to lack of sufficient practical experience and emotional regulation ability, prone to feel a heavy emotional burden. Counselors who receive fewer cases per month (less than 5 cases) also show a higher level of empathy fatigue. In short, factors such as educational background, professional experience and case handling capacity all have an important impact on the empathy fatigue of psychological counselors.

According to the above research results, it can be inferred that psychological counselors are easy to feel heavy emotional burden in the early stage of their career, especially in the case of weak educational background, lack of supervision experience and practical experience, resulting in empathy fatigue. This not only affects their occupational health but may also hinder their long-term career development and job stability. Therefore, the professional support and effective emotional regulation mechanism of psychological counselors are crucial to help them better cope with high-intensity emotional labor and protect physical and mental health.

In today's globalized information age, social media and global disaster events such as epidemics, wars and refugee crises have had a profound impact on the work of psychologists. The constant spread of negative global information not only exacerbates empathy Fatigue among psychologists, but it may also trigger Global Compassion Fatigue (GCF), the emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to global tragic events [4]. Compared to traditional empathy fatigue, the effects of global empathy fatigue are more widespread and long-lasting, making it more difficult for psychologists to maintain emotional balance and appropriate mental distance during psychological counseling. Research shows that frequent exposure to information about global tragedies can make psychologists feel anxious, sad and powerless, which in turn affects their ability to empathize emotionally with individual clients. The cumulative effect of global empathy fatigue often makes it difficult for psychologists to effectively regulate their emotions and cope with high-intensity emotional labor, reducing their resilience and potential for career growth over the long term.

According to a previous study, psychologists who have worked in psychology for a long time, especially when faced with high-need patients and global disasters, are more likely to feel emotionally exhausted [1]. Participants generally reported that the constant coverage of global disasters on social media, such as COVID-19, wars and refugee crises, made them feel

emotionally exhausted and even affected their ability to empathize with clients. The study also found that older, more experienced psychologists (ages 41 to 63) were more effective at maintaining higher emotional regulation and professional performance when dealing with the challenges of global empathy fatigue, a phenomenon that echoes the aforementioned advantages of experienced counselors in coping with emotional fatigue. Shows that older psychologists tend to be better able to manage and mitigate the effects of negative emotions. In addition, the study found that psychologists generally adopted effective coping strategies such as clinical supervision, continuing professional development (CPD), and self-care (such as exercise, meditation, and reducing social media use) to maintain emotional stability and professional adaptability. While experienced psychologists are better able to cope with global empathy fatigue, all psychologists need to reduce emotional drain through career support and emotional regulation skills to maintain long-term occupational health and psychological stability.

Burnout is the extreme emotional and psychological exhaustion experienced by individuals under prolonged work stress, often manifested as emotional exhaustion, inefficiency, and disengagement and apathy from work. Burnout is particularly common in counseling work, a profession that requires psychologists to constantly put in a lot of emotional labor to help others cope with pain and trauma. The onset of burnout can cause psychologists to feel emotionally drained, alienated from their work, and even affect their ability to provide emotional support. Understanding the factors that contribute to burnout is therefore critical to helping psychologists effectively deal with emotional challenges at work. In addition to emotional burden, the influencing factors of empathy fatigue include individual characteristics, empathy style and anti-empathy response. The personality characteristics of psychologists and their emotional responses at work are closely related to job burnout and psychological fatigue. Next, this paper will further explore how these factors, especially personality traits, empathic types, and anti-empathic responses, work together to lead to burnout and emotional exhaustion in counselors.

According to a previous research, personality traits, empathic styles, and counter-empathy responses play an important role in burnout in psychologists [5]. The study surveyed 51 Indian clinical psychologists using quantitative research methods to assess their personality traits, empathic types, counter-empathic responses, and the relationship between these factors and empathy fatigue and burnout. The results of the study showed that Neuroticism was significantly positively associated with job burnout, emotional exhaustion, and deindividuation, suggesting that emotionally unstable psychologists were more prone to job burnout due to emotional overload. This finding is consistent with the previously mentioned theory of empathy fatigue, which suggests that too much emotional consumption can lead to emotional burnout in psychologists, which in turn can lead to a decline in work performance and mental health.

In addition, conscientiousness was negatively associated with job burnout, meaning that psychologists with greater self-discipline were better able to manage job stress and maintain professional adaptability. Psychologists with higher self-discipline are often able to regulate their emotional input more effectively and avoid excessive emotional consumption, thus reducing the risk of job burnout. This echoes the idea mentioned earlier that experienced psychologists are better able to cope with emotional fatigue. The study also found that different styles of empathy have a significant impact on job burnout. Emotional empathy exacerbates burnout, possibly because psychologists invest too much emotion in emotional empathy, increasing the psychological burden. Cognitive empathy contributes to job satisfaction and helps psychologists provide emotional support while maintaining professional objectivity and emotional distance. This suggests that excessive emotional

engagement can lead to emotional exhaustion, while maintaining a moderate emotional distance helps maintain occupational health.

In addition to personality traits and empathic styles, countertransference has also been found to have an important impact on burnout. Countertransference is when psychologists project their own emotional problems and experiences onto clients in their interactions with clients. Research has shown that different types of counter-transference responses have different effects on job burnout. Distance CT is positively correlated with deindividuation, meaning that psychologists may feel apathy and alienation from their work when they maintain too much emotional distance from their patients. Closeness CT was positively correlated with Compassion Satisfaction, suggesting that moderate emotional connection and empathy could enhance psychologists' professional accomplishment and job satisfaction.

Overall, psychologists' personality traits, empathic styles and counter-empathic responses jointly influence their job burnout and emotional exhaustion. Psychologists who are emotionally unstable are more likely to feel the emotional burden, while psychologists who are more self-disciplined are more effective at managing work stress. Excessive emotional empathy may exacerbate job burnout, while moderate cognitive empathy and emotional distance help maintain occupational health. The type of countertransference also has an important impact on job burnout. Distance type of countertransference may lead to job alienation, while intimacy type of counter-transference helps to improve job satisfaction. Therefore, psychologists should strengthen self-awareness, reasonably regulate emotional empathy, and maintain professional distance from cognitive empathy to avoid emotional fatigue and job burnout. These findings emphasize the importance of personality traits, empathic style and counter-empathy in the occupational health of psychological counselors and suggest that psychologists should help themselves regulate emotional responses, reduce emotional burden, and improve career continuity and psychological adaptability through professional supervision and psychological support system.

2.2 Relevant factors to compassion fatigue

Empathy plays a crucial role in a mental health worker's career, both as a skill necessary to help others and as one of the key factors that puts psychologists at risk of empathy fatigue. Empathy is widely recognized as an indispensable quality in the helping profession. However, research shows that empathy is more than simple emotional response, and the type and manner in which it is displayed has a profound impact on burnout and empathy fatigue among psychologists. In particular, positive empathy, negative empathy and cognitive empathy, three different forms of empathy, have different effects on job burnout. Studies have shown that positive empathy can improve psychologists' job satisfaction and psychological resilience, while negative empathy may lead to emotional overload, increase the risk of secondary traumatic stress, and further exacerbate job burnout.

Researchers analyzed the effects of empathy types on burnout in 59 clinical workers, 76 medical students, and 77 teaching assistants [6]. Studies have found a significant negative correlation between Positive Empathy and job burnout, which means that workers who are able to positively experience the emotions of others are more likely to maintain psychological resilience and job satisfaction in their careers. Positive empathy enables psychologists to establish a deep emotional connection with others, and it is not easy to consume too much psychological energy because of others' emotions, so as to effectively avoid the occurrence of burnout. However, negative empathy, the excessive perception and absorption of negative emotions from others, although weakly or not significantly associated with job burnout, is associated with Secondary Traumatic Stress, especially in groups such as medical students.

Negative empathy may lead psychologists to bring the pain of others into their own emotions, thus forming a psychological burden, which can easily lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout in the long run. Therefore, excessive empathy for the suffering of others can become a psychological burden for psychologists, especially in the process of dealing with high-intensity emotional work.

Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand the emotions of others without directly feeling empathy. The study also found that in some groups, such as medical students, cognitive empathy is negatively correlated with Compassion Satisfaction, meaning that while cognitive empathy helps maintain professional emotional distance, over-reliance on cognitive empathy may cause psychologists to feel alienated from their work and reduce emotional engagement with their profession.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that he or she can successfully complete a particular task or deal with a challenge. In psychology work, high self-efficacy helps to improve the psychologist's career adaptability, emotional regulation and job satisfaction. Self-efficacy plays a crucial role in a psychologist's career, and it has a profound impact on the psychologist's work performance, emotional regulation and career adaptability. Research shows that psychological counselors with high self-efficacy are more likely to experience high compassion satisfaction, that is, they can get a sense of professional achievement and positive feedback when engaged in psychological counseling work, and then enhance work enthusiasm and career happiness. On the contrary, psychologists with low self-efficacy are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and increased psychological stress, which may lead to job burnout and empathy fatigue. Therefore, improving the self-efficacy of psychologists is considered to be an effective strategy to reduce occupational fatigue and enhance occupational adaptability.

According to a previous study, 142 Turkish school counselors participated in a study of the effects of self-efficacy on occupational psychological states [7]. The results of the study showed that counselors with high self-efficacy were more likely to have higher empathic satisfaction, that is, they were more likely to feel career achievements and positive feedback from their work, thus enhancing work enthusiasm and career happiness. In addition, the study also found that self-efficacy was negatively correlated with job burnout and empathic fatigue, meaning that psychologists with lower self-efficacy were more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and psychological stress. Therefore, the improvement of self-efficacy can effectively alleviate the job burnout and emotional fatigue of psychologists, and enhance their ability to adapt to work.

However, it is worth noting that although self-efficacy had a strong predictive effect on empathic fatigue, it had a weak predictive effect on job burnout, suggesting that job burnout may be influenced by more other factors (such as work environment, case stress, etc.). This suggests that in addition to improving self-efficacy, it is also necessary to take more comprehensive measures to improve the occupational health of psychologists by considering the influence of other factors on job burnout.

Self-oriented empathy plays a complex role in psychological counseling. While empathy is a core ability to help others, excessive self-directed empathy can exacerbate empathy fatigue. According to a previous study, self-directed empathy significantly increases the emotional exhaustion and psychological burden of psychological counselors [8]. Part of the reason is that it weakens the level of mindfulness in counselors. Excessive empathy makes counselors lose their self-emotional regulation and objective consciousness in emotional labor, which leads them to easily fall into emotional consumption. Low levels of mindfulness further undermine counselors' sense of self-efficacy and make them less confident in providing emotional support, which in turn increases levels of burnout and empathy fatigue.

The study also shows that the relationship between this set of variables plays a key role in the development of empathic fatigue. By affecting mindfulness and self-efficacy, self-directed empathy promotes the emotional overconsumption of counselors and reduces their professional adaptability and mental health. Therefore, proper management of empathy, especially by strengthening mindfulness training and occupational competence promotion during training, can effectively reduce the negative effects of empathy fatigue. Based on the research results, it can be inferred that psychological counselors should strengthen the management of self-directed empathy and effectively reduce empathy fatigue by promoting mindfulness and professional self-confidence.

Self-efficacy, spiritual well-being and empathic satisfaction are the important factors affecting job burnout and empathic fatigue of psychologists. Studies have shown that a high sense of self-efficacy can help psychological counselors maintain a high level of occupational adaptability and self-confidence in high-intensity emotional labor, thereby reducing the risk of emotional consumption and job burnout. The improvement of spiritual well-being can also enhance the self-efficacy of psychological counselors, and then enhance their professional achievement and empathic satisfaction, and reduce occupational fatigue. Although these factors may vary across cultures, research shows that they generally have a positive impact on the career stability and mental health of counselors.

The results of a study of 55 Pakistani mental health professionals showed a significant positive correlation between mental well-being and self-efficacy [9]. This means that counselors with higher levels of mental well-being were more confident in their abilities at work, and this confidence further promoted their empathic satisfaction and reduced the occurrence of empathic fatigue. The study also found that counselors with a higher sense of self-efficacy are usually more likely to experience a sense of professional achievement, thus reducing the emotional consumption and job burnout brought by long-term psychological counseling work. Conversely, psychologists with lower self-efficacy were more affected by negative emotions, leading to higher levels of empathy fatigue.

The study highlights the pervasive role of self-efficacy and mental well-being across different cultural contexts, especially in cultures like Pakistan, where demographic variables such as gender, age, and educational background do not significantly influence these factors. Nevertheless, self-efficacy and mental well-being still play an important role in improving job adaptability and reducing burnout among counselors. Therefore, improving the self-efficacy and mental well-being of counselors, especially in a cultural context like Pakistan's, is critical to reducing empathic fatigue and increasing job satisfaction. Based on the above findings, it can be inferred that regardless of cultural background, improving the self-efficacy and spiritual well-being of psychological counselors can effectively reduce empathy fatigue and improve work adaptability. Especially in a culture such as Pakistan, the enhancement of mental well-being can enhance the professional self-confidence and emotional regulation of counselors.

3. Effective interventions and coping strategies for compassion fatigue

3.1 Effective intervention strategies for coping with empathic fatigue

The study suggests that coping with empathic fatigue is not only an individual responsibility, but also requires support at the organizational level. Empathy fatigue is a common problem in helping professions that engage in intensive emotional labor for a long time, such as

psychological counselors, nurses, social workers, and teachers. In response to this problem, the study proposes multi-level intervention strategies designed to help professionals identify symptoms of empathic fatigue, promote emotional resilience, set professional boundaries, avoid emotional overdraft, and mitigate the negative effects of empathic fatigue through professional support systems. In particular, psychological education, emotional regulation skills, professional boundary setting, and professional support are key strategies for alleviating empathy fatigue.

Previous research has found that practitioners with high levels of empathy, particularly professionals with long-term exposure to traumatic events, such as emergency nurses and crisis intervention counselors, are more likely to experience empathy fatigue [10]. The study emphasizes that while empathic fatigue and burnout have similarities, the root causes of the two are different - empathic fatigue mainly comes from long-term emotional interaction with the sufferer, while burnout is more influenced by the work environment and organizational management. Long-term occupational exposure, unresolved personal traumatic experiences, and social and environmental stresses (such as pandemics and wars) are considered major risk factors for empathic fatigue, exacerbating emotional exhaustion and psychological stress among practitioners.

To alleviate empathic fatigue, several effective intervention strategies have been proposed. First, psychological education is an important strategy to help practitioners identify early symptoms of empathic fatigue and improve self-awareness, so as to achieve early intervention. By recognizing the existence of empathy fatigue, professionals can take timely steps to avoid emotional overload. Second, emotional regulation techniques, such as mindfulness training, meditation, and cognitive restructuring, can effectively enhance the emotional resilience of practitioners and help them better cope with the stress of emotional labor. These techniques help practitioners maintain mental balance and emotional stability and reduce the impact of negative emotions. In addition, setting professional boundaries is also an effective coping strategy to help practitioners reasonably control empathic input and avoid emotional overdraft. By setting clear professional boundaries, helpers can provide emotional support while maintaining an appropriate professional distance, thereby avoiding emotional exhaustion. Finally, seeking professional support is one of the key measures to deal with empathy fatigue. Through regular professional supervision, peer support groups and case discussions, practitioners can obtain emotional support and psychological relief, reducing work stress and emotional burden. These intervention strategies provide effective support from the individual to the organizational level, helping to improve the occupational resilience, mental health and long-term sustainability of practitioners.

In addition, the study highlights organizational support for the management of empathic fatigue, suggesting that health institutions and mental health systems should strengthen mental health support systems for workers in supportive occupations, such as providing regular mental health assessments, establishing emotional management training, and optimizing workload management to ensure that workers maintain mental health during long-term, high-intensity emotional labor. And promote occupational sustainability and long-term adaptability.

3.2 Coping strategies and cross-level interventions for empathic fatigue

Empathy fatigue is a challenge that counselors are prone to encounter in long-term, high-intensity emotional labor. Excessive emotional involvement, especially self-directed empathy, may lead to excessive emotional consumption, which leads to emotional exhaustion, psychological stress, job burnout and other problems. Psychologists' personality

characteristics, empathic style and counter-empathic response have significant effects on job burnout and emotional fatigue. Studies have shown that affective empathy may exacerbate job burnout, while cognitive empathy helps boost job satisfaction and enhances professional objectivity and occupational health by maintaining emotional distance.

Self-efficacy plays a key role in alleviating empathy fatigue. Enhancing the self-efficacy of psychologists can help reduce job burnout and empathic fatigue and improve career stability and mental health. By training in self-efficacy building content (such as skills training, case discussions, and supervisory feedback), psychologists can enhance professional confidence and emotional regulation, better cope with emotional challenges, and reduce the risk of burnout and empathy fatigue.

At the same time, solving the problem of empathy fatigue not only depends on individual emotional regulation and occupational boundary setting, but also needs organizational support. Mental health institutions and medical systems should provide a comprehensive mental health support system, including regular mental health assessments, emotional management training, and workload optimization measures. These strategies help reduce empathy fatigue, help practitioners maintain mental health in long-term high-intensity emotional work, and enhance career adaptability and sustainable development. Through the joint efforts of organizations and individuals, practitioners of helping professions can more effectively manage the stress of emotional labor, enhance work enthusiasm and job satisfaction, reduce the risk of job burnout and empathic fatigue, and promote occupational adaptability and long-term development potential.

4. Conclusion

Empathic fatigue is an important problem in helping professions in general, and for counselors in particular, as it can seriously affect their mental health and professional performance. This study explores multiple factors that contribute to empathy fatigue, including the type of empathy counselors exhibit, their sense of self-efficacy, and the impact of global events on their emotional well-being. The findings highlight the importance of effectively managing empathy in high-pressure environments, and in particular the central role of self-efficacy and mental well-being in reducing empathy fatigue. By implementing appropriate interventions, such as psychoeducation, emotional regulation skills, and professional support, counselors can be enhanced in their ability to manage emotional burdens, thereby enhancing their professional sustainability.

Precious findings mainly focus on the causes and coping strategies of empathic fatigue of psychological counselors, and there are some limitations. First of all, the sample of the study mainly focused on psychological counselors from specific cultural backgrounds, so the universality of the results may be affected, especially for psychological counselors from other cultural backgrounds, and further verification may be required. Second, although this study proposes effective intervention strategies, the long-term effects and practical application effects of these strategies have not been fully tested. Therefore, future research could consider conducting longitudinal studies to assess the effectiveness of different interventions in different cultures and work settings. In addition, as the psychological counseling work environment continues to change, future research can further explore the potential of digital technology in alleviating empathy fatigue, with a view to providing more comprehensive support for psychological counselors.

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