

Understanding Resilience of Counsellors working publicly in Rural and Remote NSW

BACKGROUND

Counsellors working as sole practitioners in rural and remote towns in New South Wales (NSW) experience unique challenges. The aim of this study was to explore the resilience experiences of this workforce with a view to provide improved support and potential retention of workers in these roles.

METHODS

This qualitative study used semi-structured individual interviews supported by an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology. AI was chosen for its ability to focus on strengths and identify ways to provide further support. Results were thematically analysed by coding the interview transcripts to identify themes.

RESULTS

The participants identified challenges of working and living in rural and remote towns. The challenges were associated with professional isolation and community interaction and were consistent with those identified in the literature. The participants were able to demonstrate resilience in the strategies they had employed to meet these challenges. These were identified in three themes: i) building connection and relationships within their community and with other professionals, ii) skills in self-care, and iii) acknowledging their role in the client's development of resilience. Building professional and community connections mitigated the challenge of professional isolation. The participants were intentional in their self-care strategies. The strategies identified by the participants expanded on the expected self-care activities to include taking part in bigger picture activities. In acknowledging their role in the client's development of resilience, the concepts compassion satisfaction and vicarious resilience were explored. Although the participants were able to talk about experiences where they developed a sense of wellbeing from being part of their client's development of resilience, they were not familiar with the terms compassion satisfaction and vicarious resilience that describe this phenomenon. A reason for this is that the terms are not clearly defined in the literature and this study contributes to the ongoing discussion around a more consistent definition of these concepts.

CONCLUSION

Counsellors working as sole practitioners were skilled in developing resilience. The challenge for health services is to facilitate ongoing connections with other professionals. Future directions for the workforce revolve around enhanced understanding and application of the concepts of vicarious resilience and compassion satisfaction.

KEYWORDS

rural, remote, retention, compassion satisfaction, vicarious resilience.

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Susan is a Social Worker with over 20 years experience in Child Protection. Four years ago, she moved from statutory child protection to NSW Health when she took on the role of Child Protection Counsellor in Bourke. This was her first experience working and living in a remote town. Through this experience she became interested in looking at the resilience of workers in similar situations. As a 2019 RRCBP candidate she completed a qualitative study looking at resilience in sole practitioner counsellors working in rural and remote NSW towns. Susan is now based at Orange Community Health.

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