Objective

Working with children and youth is one of the most challenging and rewarding professions in the field of social services. Children and youth that have major psychological, behavioral, and emotional complications are often admitted into residential treatment programs and youth care workers of these programs guide these high-risk children and juveniles towards a positive mindset. This process can be stressful and difficult but only a limited number of studies have analyzed the problems these workers face.

In response, this qualitative study examined common difficulties and experiences among youth care workers in the C.S.P. Children’s Crisis Intervention Program (youth shelter). By identifying stress levels and character types and analyzing employee behavior, this project identified the hardships and coping mechanisms of youth care workers. Results show that they may not express emotions held privately even though the unpredictability of working with this unstable population can cause emotional and physical stress. Results help identify the type of employee (empathetic and rule-abiding) needed for working with youth in the mental health industry.

About the Shelter

The Laguna Beach Children’s Crisis Residential Program is a voluntary short term crisis intervention youth shelter for runaway, homeless and at-risk youth, between the ages of 11-17. The shelter is open 24/7 and provides individual, group, and family counseling. There are approximately 30 staff members including Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT’s), a volunteer coordinator, director, tutors, finance associates, youth specialists, and college interns. This program is an emergency and temporary shelter for youth referred by the Orange County Health Care Agency Children and Youth Services Crisis Assessment Team (CAT). After being hospitalized for a suicide attempt, anger outbursts, abuse, and/or alcohol and substance abuse these adolescents find themselves in a house of strangers wondering how actions led them to a shelter.

The purpose of this program is to help children cope with hardships, stresses, and mental issues. The overall goal is to keep youngsters from becoming victims of violence and crime or becoming involved in the formal juvenile justice system. During this critical stage for the children, youth shelter workers are left with the task of guiding these children into a positive mindset and environment.

Research Methods

The research seeks to understand the social norms of youth shelter workers using a naturalistic approach. The study population consisted of employees ages 21-40. The majority were women and had a bachelor’s degree. The data collected included field notes, interviews, and observations:

- **Direct observations**: Using an observation guide, I took notes during group activities with residents and during staff conversations. I analyzed youth resident’s engagement with staff, taking note of specific mood changes or behaviors with staff, and took a close look at emotional effects over time.

- **Semi-structured interviews**: Face-to-face interviews with youth shelter workers entailed 15 open-ended questions relating to their experiences. This provided respondents an opportunity to share their own unique experiences at C.S.P.

Findings

**Purpose**

There are few research studies that focus on the struggles workers in a youth shelter face. The purpose of this study is to shine light on the hardships these workers experience. It is important to help meet employees’ needs so that they will be better able to help youth struggling with mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, and suicide and homicide ideation. This project helps bring awareness to strengthen programs like the C.S.P. youth shelter and aims to make a positive impact on participants and community members by helping identify factors associated with the improvement of mental health programs. It helps promote in-depth research on the struggles of youth care workers, helps the community by promoting a healthy mental state, and helps at risk teens make better healthy choices.

**Maintain a positive appearance no matter the circumstance**

Employees play the role that is expected of them (Karabanow 1999). For instance, a youth shelter employee is expected to maintain a happy appearance and show positivism, which at times lead to increase in employee stress.

**Unpredictability of duties and clients**

Working with teens in a youth shelter is unpredictable: “I never know how a resident will react to participating in an activity or treatment, so I have to be prepared for any response.”

**Strong social support from staff is a coping mechanism**

Based on interviews, employees faced with a challenging and/or opposing resident or any stressful situation often find that confiding in co-workers relieves stress and frustration.

**Recommendations**

The call to action is to teach parents the importance of learning about their kid’s diagnosis, how they can help them, and how they can find support. I believe the shelter should implement a counselor that teaches parents the risk factors and warning signs of challenges common among adolescents, including anxiety, depression, psychosis, eating disorders, AD/HD, disruptive behavior disorders, and variety of mental health substance use disorders.

**CSP Children’s Crisis Residential Program; A Qualitative Analysis of Employee Experiences**

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