

Occupational Vulnerability for Psychologists: A Theoretical Overview

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While there are a number of approaches to understanding occupational vulnerability and impairment in psychologists, the most useful of those emphasize the *interaction* between the specific demands of the work and individual characteristics of each psychologist. In other words, as psychologists, our vulnerability to occupational stress stems from the interaction between particular aspects of our work (the situation) and aspects of who we are and our current life circumstances (the person).

An interactive model supports our contention that *all psychologists are vulnerable to occupational stress and distress at times in their careers, and may be vulnerable to impairment given the right circumstances*. One can think of this vulnerability as a continuum from occupational stress to personal distress to professional impairment. It is our contention that earlier awareness and intervention are in the best interests of psychologists and the public they serve.

Despite a small, but compelling literature on occupational stress for psychologists and other mental health professionals, the topic of vulnerability is not widely addressed within the profession. The prevalence of stigma associated with psychological distress and a misguided belief that psychologists should not be affected by their work, combine to create a "conspiracy of silence" (Pope, 1994) about occupational vulnerability for psychologists. Yet, at the same time, research studies indicate the very real effect of distress and impairment on psychologists (Guy, 1989; Pope, 1987).

Aspects of the person or individual psychologist

As a therapist, each psychologist draws upon his or her unique resources and knowledge, shaped by personal history, life experiences, personality, temperament, biology, and spirituality. These unique personal characteristics represent both strengths and potential areas of vulnerability - by themselves or in interaction with aspects of our work situation. *Our strongest protection is our level of self-awareness*. Every psychologist is vulnerable; it is up to each of us to identify our specific areas of vulnerability.

Personal history

Psychologists enter their profession for deeply personal reasons. We each choose our areas of specialization, theoretical orientations, clientele, and other areas of professional focus for reasons that are influenced by our past and present experiences. We use our own emotional and cognitive responses to the world as tools in our clinical work. The better we understand our own responses and their etiology, the better able we are to use our responses in the best interest of our clients and of the work itself.