

Burnout, PTSD, & Spiritual Practices Among Guatemalan Aid Workers

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Abstract

Due to civil war and genocide, Guatemala has experienced trauma and community violence, which has necessitated the presence of NGOs that provide mental health services to communities and families. Research findings indicate that humanitarian aid workers in dangerous locations are at risk for higher levels of distress and burnout. However, the role of possible protective factors needs to be explored for this population. The goal of the current study was to examine the ways that spiritual practices, burnout and PTSD symptoms are related among a group of Guatemalan aid workers. A group of 135 humanitarian aid workers from four NGOs and universities completed surveys regarding burnout, spiritual practices, and PTSD symptomatology. In terms of burnout, higher emotional exhaustion (EE) was positively associated with PTSD symptomatology. Personal accomplishment (PA) was negatively associated with PTSD and was positively associated with spiritual practices. Spiritual practices were not significantly correlated with PTSD symptoms. For this sample, higher levels of personal accomplishment were related to higher frequency of spiritual practices and to lower levels of PTSD symptoms. Implications for support for aid workers in high-risk environments will be discussed.

Purpose of Study

International humanitarian aid workers are often exposed to stressors, both through the often dangerous environments in which they serve, as well as through vicarious trauma^{3, 4}. The relations between spiritual practices, burnout, and PTSD symptoms need to be explored within this population to explore potential protective factors. Surveys were administered to aid workers at four Guatemalan NGOs to assess spiritual practices, levels of burnout, including personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion, and PTSD symptoms. This information will inform future trainings and support systems developed to benefit the workers.

Method Procedure

Surveys were administered in four different settings over a one year period. The first group of participants came from a faith-based NGO in Guatemala City who work with families living in the Guatemala City Dump. The second group of surveys were administered to workers at a faith-based NGO serving poor children. The third group consisted of aid workers from a secular university who document testimonies of genocide. The fourth group of participants came from a faith-based Mayan organization who help families recover from the trauma of the civil war.

- The sample consisted of paid administrators and teachers and unpaid volunteers from the four organizations ($N = 135$).

Participants used paper and pencil to complete the surveys which took approximately 45 minutes to complete.

Measures

Participants were administered instruments designed to assess symptoms of posttraumatic stress and burnout, and personal religious practices:

- Los Angeles Symptom Checklist (LASC)⁵
- Maslach Burnout Inventory- Human Service Survey (MBI-HSS)⁶
- Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality (BMMRS)⁷

Participants

Gender: 64% female ($n = 87$), 36% male ($n = 48$)
 Age: 69% between ages of 19 - 36 ($n = 93$)
 Ethnicity: 68% Ladina/o ($n = 71$), 23% Indigenous ($n = 31$)
 Length of service: 32% less than two years ($n = 43$)

Results

Emotional Exhaustion and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms

• Positive correlation between levels of emotional exhaustion and reports of posttraumatic stress symptoms

• $r = .283$
 • $p = .000$

3 Most Frequently Reported Symptoms of Emotional Exhaustion (at least once per month)

- 83% - I feel emotionally drained as a result of my work.
- 83% - I feel like I've given all I have after finishing a day of work.
- 70% - I think I'm working too hard in my place of employment.

Personal Accomplishment and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms

• Negative correlation between personal accomplishment and reports of posttraumatic stress symptoms

- Higher levels of personal accomplishment associated with lower levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms
- Lower levels of personal accomplishment associated with higher levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms

• $r = -.336$
 • $p = .000$

3 Most Frequently Reported Feelings of Personal Accomplishment (at least once per month)

- 98% - I feel I have achieved many valuable things in this work.
- 97% - I feel invigorated after working closely with my clients.
- 96% - I feel I have a positive influence in the lives of those with whom I work.

Spiritual Practices

• Positive correlation between spiritual practices and feelings of personal accomplishment

• $r = .149$
 • $p = .04$

• Frequencies of spiritual practices were not related to PTSD symptomatology ($r = ns$)

3 Most Frequently Reported Spiritual Practices (at least once per month)

- 93% - Meditation
- 92% - Private prayer, outside of church or synagogue
- 79% - Mealtime prayer

Discussion/Implications

Burnout

Emotional Exhaustion

- The findings of this study suggest that levels of emotional exhaustion are related to levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms in aid workers.
- This finding suggests that workers who have PTSD symptoms may be more vulnerable to burnout related to their work. Support with management of PTSD symptoms may help increase the longevity of aid work in addition to the well-being of aid workers.

Personal Accomplishment

- This research also suggests that workers who have PTSD symptoms feel that their work is not as meaningful or that their work does not have an impact. It is also possible that workers who have high levels of Personal Accomplishment are somehow protected from the effects of PTSD symptoms with regard to their work.
- Workers who have higher levels of PTSD symptoms may need support in making meaning and feeling a sense of accomplishment in their work. Support in management of PTSD symptoms may help workers with feeling a sense of accomplishment.

Spiritual Practices

- Workers who engage in spiritual practices more frequently report a greater sense of personal accomplishment in their work.
- It is possible that for those workers who are religious, making room for them to express or practice their religious beliefs in the work setting may support their feelings of accomplishment through their service provision.
- Personal accomplishment may act as a mediator between spiritual practices and PTSD and should be explored further as a protective factor.

Recommended Organizational Support:

- Workers may benefit from interventions aimed at substantiating preventative measures by 1) providing psychoeducation about the nature and prevalence of burnout and posttraumatic stress symptomatology, 2) including PTSD counseling as a part of worker support, and/or 3) establishing trauma processing groups as another form of therapeutic support.
- Given the positive impact of spiritual practices on feelings of personal accomplishment, measures can be taken to provide space, encouragement for, and support of workers' personal spiritual practices and individual expressions of faith.

Suggestions for Future Research

- Future research needs to be conducted to identify the specific nuances of how spiritual practices affect burnout and PTSD, as well as if/how they might serve as mediating sources of positive coping and/or resilience.
- More research should undoubtedly be done on the relationship between burnout, traumatic stressors, and PTSD in international contexts in order to not only prepare and equip aid workers for jobs in dangerous settings, but also to possibly prevent the development of PTSD following trauma exposure.

Limitations of the Study:

- The study used a convenience sample and drew aid workers from agencies where the researchers had contacts. It is not a random sample of aid workers in Guatemala, and therefore the ability to generalize from these findings to other Guatemalan aid workers and national aid workers in other countries may be limited.
- Though the transcripts were reviewed by several different translators, it is possible that the translation of the documents does not accurately reflect the precise attitudes and opinions of the workers who participated in the study.

References

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