



Research at a glance

Working with Offenders who Self-Injure: Fostering Staff Resilience in High Stress Situations

KEY WORDS: *self-injurious behaviour, staff burnout, staff resilience, interventions*

What it means

Several evidence-based interventions were identified for correctional staff in the literature, including education and training related specifically to self-injurious behaviour (SIB), role clarification to address the conflict between the requirement to maintain institutional security and safety and promote offender rehabilitation, coping skills training to reduce workplace stress and improve wellness, and the implementation of peer support groups to encourage team-based problem solving and debriefing. Implementation of specific interventions should be accompanied by a framework to assess efficacy and outcomes.

What we found

Staff who work with offenders who engage in SIB are at increased risk of burnout, a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Role conflict and ambiguity, as well as a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, were noted as important correlates of burnout, particularly for younger or less experienced staff. Staff who regularly encounter SIB could be at risk for experiencing secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, or vicarious traumatization. These staff members often feel ill-equipped to deal with SIB and may lack specific training in the etiology and treatment of the behaviour. Protective factors identified in the literature include social support, coping skills, physical and mental health, and a perception of adequate skills to competently perform the job.

Burnout prevention interventions typically take two forms: (1) individual-focused and (2) organization-focused. Most of the research conducted to date has focused on interventions aimed at supporting individual staff members, such as education and job training, coping skills training, peer support groups, cognitive-behavioural therapy, and critical incident debriefing. Few organization-focused interventions have been empirically validated.

Why we did this study

Correctional staff are frequently exposed to high stress situations, particularly when working with offenders who engage in SIB. Continued exposure to high stress environments may have negative physical and psychological effects and staff who work with offenders who engage in SIB are at increased risk of burnout. The purpose of this research was to identify evidence-based interventions or management practices that promote staff resilience and could be implemented to mitigate stressful working environments in correctional institutions.

What we did

A literature review was conducted to identify specific factors related to burnout in correctional staff and characteristics of staff resilience when working with offenders who self-injure. A review of the literature on evidence-based interventions that have been successfully implemented at the organizational and individual level was also undertaken.

For more information

Power, J. & Usher, A. (2014). *Working with Offenders who Self-Injure: Staff Resilience in High Stress Situations*. Research Report R276. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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