

# Online Stress Management Support Groups for Social Workers



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# Why Stress Management for Social Workers?

- Clients in crisis
- Time pressure
- Inadequate resources
- Ambiguous, conflicting roles
- Lack of feedback
- Demands of profession and family
- Changing external factors
  - Managed care
  - Technology



# What are the Results of Job Stress for Social Workers?

- High aspirations and strong commitment change to compromise and self-defeating cognitions and behaviors
- Toxic effects on coworkers
- Rigid functioning
- Decreased commitment
- Turnover
- Illness, substance abuse, depression



# Support Groups in Social Work

- Efficacy of support groups for stress reduction
  - Safe space for feelings
  - Emotional support
  - Shared coping
  - Problem solving
  - Feedback



# Do social workers use support groups?

- Coping by isolating
- Threat to professional self-esteem
- Shame in “failings”



# Why Online Support Groups?

- New modality
- Schedule flexibility
- Location flexibility
- More control over rate of social interaction
- Less stress over social presentation



# Online Groups: Variations?

## ■ Newsgroups

- Asynchronous, open membership, unlimited size, not facilitated, 24-hour access

## ■ Bulletin Boards

- Asynchronous, open membership, unlimited size, may have guest expert for questions, 24-hour access

## ■ Listservs

- Asynchronous, closed or open membership, wide size ranges, usually not facilitated, 24-hour access

## ■ Chat Group

- Synchronous, closed or open membership, limited size (12), may have guest expert for questions, scheduled, time-limited



# Potential Benefits

- Benefits:
  - Access if in rural areas or mobility limited or no others with similar condition near
  - Studies have shown reduced stress in teenage mothers (Dunham et al., 1998), improved quality of life for HIV+ patients (Gustafson et al., 1999), and prolonged sobriety for drug addicted (King, 1994)



# Potential Risks

- Little documented evidence on risk
- Uncertainty of members' self-representation via Internet
- Dissatisfaction with responses
- Internet time shrinks their face to face support time
- Confidentiality



# Pilot Study (Meier, 1997)

- 6 week stress reduction support group
- Moderated listserv, asynchronous
- 11 Masters level social work student recruited from classes
- Semi-structured format—topic introduced each week by group facilitator
- Quantitative data on participant satisfaction
- Qualitative data from field notes and all email messages



# Results

- Challenges to start-up because of participant inexperience with email
- By Week 3, 6 participants remained
- Discussion on stresses of technology, work, school, finances, family pressures
- Group leader summarized discussion and themes each week, to help track all threads



# Results

- Participants were moderately satisfied with topics discussed
  - All reported learning at least some new strategies for increasing personal well-being
  - All stated the group was too small and should have lasted longer
- Group leader felt two roles (facilitator and listserv owner) should be separated
- Conclusion: Online group a feasible intervention, with modifications



# Follow Up Study (Meier, 2000)

## ■ Questions:

- Can social workers be recruited for online support group via Internet?
- Will members participate?
- What will their chosen topics be?
- Will they achieve social cohesion?
- Will the group provide social support?
- Will members be satisfied?
- Will the group reduce stress and increase coping?



# Methods

- Participants recruited by posting to 44 listserv groups, then screening respondents
- Targeted MSWs in full time practice with Internet access at home
- Two waves recruited 52 participants, randomly assigned to Intervention or Control Groups



# Methods

- Baseline: background information, Occupational Stress Inventory (OSI) (Osipow & Spokane, 1987)
- Post-group: comprehensive satisfaction survey (Intervention Group), OSI



# Intervention

- 10 week online stress support group
- Group leader for facilitation
- Requested at least 1 posting per week



# Results

## ■ Sociodemographics:

- 84% female, 43 years old (mean), 95% European American, 68% married, 84% had 1 or more child under 18, 95% had aging parents
- 79% private sector agencies, mean of 11.5 years work in field, 40-65 hrs/week



# Results

- Stressors (self-report):
  - 89% in good/excellent health
  - 47% treated for anxiety or depression in past 2 years
  - 47% dissatisfied with relationship with spouse, 42% with parents, 27% with children
  - 32% actively involved in caring for chronically ill relative
- OSI
  - High scores in 3 scales: 84% Role Ambiguity, 74% Role Boundaries, 52% Responsibilities



# Results: Group Participation

Week	#members	#messages
1	22	31
2	19	43
3	17	53
4	17	35
5	14	52
6	15	77
7	11	39
8	12	26
9	11	20
10	13	18



# Stress and Coping Themes

Theme	#members	#comments
Coping with personal stress	15	68
Life narratives	14	92
Coping with professional stress	17	96
Macro-level stressors	15	38
Personal stress	19	60
Organizational stressors	18	80
Professional role stressors	17	150



# Results: Group Cohesion

- Member responsiveness:
  - By end of group almost all messages commented on other member messages
- Perceived similarity
  - Only 53% agreed they perceive their experiences as similar overall
- Desire to continue the group
  - 68% expressed interest in continuing, and did continue for another 10 weeks as a leaderless group



# Results: Social Support

- Low number of direct requests for support (17 requests)
- High number of support acknowledged statements (83 comments)
- High number of supportive comments (209 comments)



# Results: Satisfaction

- 74% satisfied overall with group
- 79% thought lasted right # of weeks
- 90% agreed group leader had been helpful
- 79% satisfied with range of topics
- 58% felt problems related to computerization in human services had not been adequately addressed
- 90% agreed it was easy to communicate in writing



# Results: Satisfaction

- 58% comfortable not seeing other group members
- 84% disagreed with size of group (too big)
- 74% disagreed with # of messages (too many)
- 42% said took too much time



# Results: Stress Reduction

- Analyses of pre and post OSI data found no statistically significant changes in levels of occupational stress, psychological strain, coping resourcefulness
- Small sample size and weak intervention?



# Conclusions

- Possible to recruit social workers via Internet, but complex and time consuming
- Ecological perspective essential: most members had work, family, and personal stress
- Like face to face, listserv groups may function best with about 12 members
- More background information on participants may be needed to determine potential crises or support levels
- Listserv support can result in cohesive group<sup>26</sup>



# Further Research

- Reasons for lack of positive change in stress level
- How to best match discussion format with member needs
- Relationship between group leader facilitation style, and member characteristics and satisfaction
- Key dimensions where homogeneity of group is necessary
- Necessary dosage, frequency, length for effectiveness



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