

# Psychological Adjustment and Wellness of Mental Health Practitioners In-Training

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## Abstract

There is a need for counseling programs to identify counseling students who are not psychologically or emotionally fit to be counselors. There is not a clear definition of what it means to be an impaired counselor. The factors cited in academic literature relating to psychological adjustment and wellness of mental health practitioners in training were examined and analyzed. A total of 734 factors were identified from 65 articles and grouped into 17 categories that describe issues of trainee adjustment and wellness.

The field of psychology attracts individuals for many different reasons. Sometimes an individual may enter the field because of their own experiences receiving services from the mental health profession. While this is not an inherently bad reason to enter the field of psychology, if one is still dealing with one's own mental health issues, then one may not be able to fully attend to the needs of his or her clients. If counseling trainees or professional mental health professionals are too engrossed with their own issues they are going to be less likely to be able to utilize their skills effectively. It is not uncommon for mental health professionals to have psychological problems with which they are dealing (Sherman, 1996).

Psychology and counseling training faculty are tasked with the responsibility of not only training their graduates to become competent professionals upon graduation, but with the gatekeeping responsibility of identifying individuals who are not psychologically or emotionally ready to become professionals in the helping profession. One difficulty in this process is

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defining who is an unsuitable student. There is no clear definition for what constitutes impairment in psychology. Huprich and Rudd (2004) found that in general, doctoral programs did not have clear policies and programs in place to manage impairments of trainees.

In order to improve training programs' gatekeeping responsibilities, a better understanding of those factors that are likely to impair trainees need to be identified. There is considerable research that addresses the issues related to psychological adjustment and wellness of mental health practitioners in-training, but there is little literature evaluating and summarizing the above studies. In order to better understand the issues that are important for mental health trainees, a review of the factors identified in the literature would help identify those issues that seem to be most salient for this field.

The purpose of this study was to identify all of the factors in the literature that have been associated with psychological adjustment and wellness for mental health professional trainees. As a result, training faculty will have better tools to assess trainee impairment and focus on in their gatekeeping process. These factors will eventually be used to devise an instrument that measures mental health psychological adjustment and wellness.

## **Method**

### **Research Methods**

To analyze the factors in scholarly research that deal with mental health trainee psychological adjustment and wellness, the method of content analysis by Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) outline was employed. The first step was to specify research questions, hypotheses, or objectives. Then, a sample of documents were identified and analyzed. The third step was to develop a category-coding procedure. An article extraction protocol was developed to identify those factors that are pertinent to psychological adjustment and wellness for mental health professionals in-training. The fourth step was to code the data. Finally, the identified factors were categorized into larger sets until a succinct identification of categories was identified.

## Results

After undergoing a content analysis of the literature, 65 articles were identified as discussing or examining some aspect of psychological adjustment and wellness of mental health professional trainees. These 65 articles yielded 733 factors (an average of 11.27 factors per article). These 733 factors were paired with other related factors until 17 succinct categories emerged. The 17 categories that emerged were:

1. Relational Problems and Other Life Experiences ( $n = 95$ )
2. Psychological/Mental Self-Care ( $n = 93$ )
3. Clinical and Professional Competence ( $n = 82$ )
4. Stress (Including Work/School Related Stress) ( $n = 73$ )
5. Self-Aware, Reflective, and Open to Feedback ( $n = 67$ )
6. Personality Characteristics that Aid/Impede Counseling Effectiveness ( $n = 40$ )
7. Lying and Other Ethical Violations ( $n = 39$ )
8. Mental Illness and Personality Disorders ( $n = 37$ )
9. Physical Self- Care ( $n = 32$ )
10. Social-Self Identification ( $n = 31$ )
11. Inappropriate Boundaries/Exploitation of Clients ( $n = 29$ )
12. Emotional Problems ( $n = 28$ )
13. Substance Abuse/Addictive Behaviors ( $n = 26$ )
14. Depression ( $n = 21$ )
15. Academic Issues ( $n = 15$ )
16. Prejudicial Attitudes and Values ( $n = 14$ )
17. Other Unethical Motivations for Entering the Counseling Field ( $n = 11$ )

More specific factors within the 17 categories are found in Table 1.

Table 1  
*The 17 Factors of Psychological Adjustment and Wellness of Mental Health Practitioners In-Training and Common Examples from Each Factor Cited in the Literature*

Factor	Example from Academic Literature
Relational Problems and Other Life Experiences (n = 95)	Marital Problems Adjustment Disorder Personal Conflict Relational Issues Dysfunctional Family Divorce or Marriage Child Leaving Home Family-of-Origin Issues Financial Concerns Personal Trauma Life-Event Stressors
Psychological/Mental Self-Care (n = 93)	Coping Abilities Stress Management Balance of Different Aspects of Life Personal Therapy Realistic Beliefs Sense of Humor Adequate Leisure Personal Growth Behaviors That Promote Spiritual Well-Being of the Individual Sense of Self-Worth
Clinical and Professional Competence	Has Deficient Interpersonal Skills

(n = 82)

- Lack of Listening Skills
- Poor Judgment
- Unprofessional Behavior
- Lack of Counseling Skills
- Not Responding to Client's Needs
- Neglect of Professional Obligations
- Communication Skills

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Stress (Including Work/School Related Stress)  
(n = 73)

- Psychological Distress
- Anxiety Symptoms
- Job Related Stressors
- Insufficient Income
- Fatigue or Burnout
- Pressures of Evaluation (Both Formal and Informal)
- Professional Identity Issues
- Graduate School Atmosphere

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Self-Aware, Reflective, and Open to Feedback  
(n = 67)

- Emotional Awareness
- Lack of Self-awareness
- Lack of Awareness of Impact on Others
- Difficulty Receiving Supervision
- Recognition of Own Need for Psychotherapeutic Help
- Defensiveness in Supervision
- Lack of Ability to Accept Personal Responsibility

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Personality Characteristics that Aid/Impede Counseling Effectiveness  
(n = 40)

- Lack of Empathy
- Lack of Maturity
- Compassion
- Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence
- Self-Discipline

	Lack of Empathic Understanding, Genuineness, and Respect
	Motivation to Help
Lying and Other Ethical Violations (n = 39)	Lying Misrepresents His or Her Skill Level Academic Dishonesty Unethical Behavior Fraud Professional Misconduct
Mental Illness and Personality Disorders (n = 37)	Mental Illness Psychopathic Deviate Personality Disorders or Traits Paranoia Eating Disorder Symptoms Displays Psychotic Symptoms
Physical Self- Care (n = 32)	Nutrition Exercise Physical Illness Medical Conditions Physical Activities
Social-Self Identification (n = 31)	Social Problems Cultural Identity Friendship Love
Inappropriate Boundaries/Exploitation of Clients (n = 29)	Inappropriate Boundaries Over Involvement with Clients Sexual Misconduct Dual Relationships with Clients

Emotional Problems (n = 28)	Emotional Problems Mood Swings Emotional Stability and Well-Being Emotional Self-Regulation
Substance Abuse/Addictive Behaviors (n = 26)	Substance Abuse/Misuse Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse Exhibits Addictive Behavior
Depression (n = 21)	Depression Depressive Symptoms Suicidal Attempts/Ideation
Academic Issues (n = 15)	Unsatisfactory Academic Performance Classroom Behavior Problems Student's Academic Progress Matriculation (Time in the Graduate Program)
Prejudicial Attitudes and Values (n = 14)	Awareness of Race and Culture Lack of Culturally Responsive Counseling Prejudicial Attitudes Towards Others Personal Values Cultural Barriers
Other Unethical Motivations for Entering the Counseling Field (n = 11)	A Pathological Desire to "Parent" Need to be Omniscient The Need for Narcissistic Idealization

## Discussion

The categories that were developed to describe psychological adjustment and wellness issues are all important areas that could have a large impact on trainees' abilities to perform psychotherapy effectively. All of the areas that were identified have potential to be amplified by the increased rigors of graduate school and the demands of the workforce. If training programs faculty wish to improve their gatekeeping processes, knowledge of the most commonly cited factors of trainee impairment would be very useful. This would help in both the screening of potential trainees as well as in the remediation of impaired trainees.

This research will be used by the authors to conduct a national survey developing an inventory that measures psychological adjustment and wellness of mental health professional trainees. The inventory will be structured on the factors identified in this research. The patterns and structures of psychological adjustment and wellness of mental health trainees will be examined using exploratory factor analysis.

## References

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