



The Effect of Internal and External Risk Factors on Forensic Social Workers Experience of Secondary Traumatic Stress

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Abstract

Forensic social workers are particularly vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress (STS) because of their indirect exposure to the trauma narratives of sexually abused Children. Furthermore, unlike generic social workers, they must distinguish between their roles as expert witnesses and therapists. Internal and external risk factors, such as demographical, personal, and environmental factors, may influence STS symptoms in forensic social workers. However, both internationally and in South Africa, research on these risk factors in relation to forensic social workers is often neglected. The aim of this study was to describe the effect of internal and external risk factors on forensic social workers' experiences of STS. All qualified Forensic Social Workers with an MA in Forensic Practice who graduated from an accredited South African university between 2006 and 2019 and willing to participate were included in the study using an all-inclusive willing sampling method. The study employed a quantitative cross sectional descriptive design with the STS Scale (STSS) which was created using Google Forms and disseminated by email to collect the data. The data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. The effect of internal and external risk factors on STS was assessed by utilizing an independent t-test combined with Mann-Whitney U-tests to search for differences between groups. The internal factors, race and relationship status and the external factors, clinical supervision, social support, and exposure to traumatic (criminal events) were found to have varying effects on STS symptoms. The findings can help forensic social workers understand the risks associated with STS.

Keywords: expert-witness, exposure, symptoms, trauma-narratives, vulnerable