

STRESSORS REPORTED BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS  
ACROSS THE STATE OF WISCONSIN  
AND IMPLICATIONS THAT LEAD TO CAREER RESILIENCY

By

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to report what stressors elementary guidance counselors across the State of Wisconsin experienced throughout their counseling career. These counselors were also asked to evaluate a range of activities that may relieve stress and rate the effectiveness level of each activity as it related to their individual career resiliency.

One hundred elementary school counselors were mailed this two-page survey. Page one of the survey pertained to stressors that they individually might have experienced on a daily or regular basis in their role as school counselor. Page two of the survey allowed the counselor to indicate specific ways in which they dealt with stress and the effectiveness of these specific strategies.

Survey participants were asked to indicate if they were interested in being contacted for a follow-up interview. Of the 100 surveys sent, 58 surveys were returned completed. Of the 58 completed surveys, five respondents indicated they would be available for a follow-up telephone interview. Since this low number of respondents was not a representative sample of those counselors that were sent surveys, the researcher utilized only the written survey results as data for this field study.

The information found in this study has limited generalizability to other school counselors. Since the target group for his survey was elementary school counselors within the State of Wisconsin, results are meant to be generalizable only to this population.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I have met many professional colleagues and personal friends throughout my 20 years as a Stout Student. Some of these relationships have lasted nearly 20 years, while others ran their course in a matter of months. Without trying to sound too melodramatic, I have taken away a great deal from the many people I have met through my years at Stout. In fact, sometimes Stout seems more like a way of life than just a place of learning.

It would be impossible to acknowledge all of the important people I have met through my time at this university so I will try to recognize a cross-section of people who have been important to my growth as a student and a teaching professional.

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Dr. Amy Gillett is an instructor I wish I had met earlier in my teaching career. She is a consummate professional and always seems to be cheering for the “underdog.” When I talk to special education teachers who received their training at Stout in the past 10

years, they mention Amy Gillett with a gleam in their eyes. If Amy had been instructing at Stout when I began my special education training, I still might be in that field.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

As helping professionals, guidance counselors are especially susceptible and well situated by their role expectations and responsibilities to suffer the signs and consequences of burnout. In fact, for school guidance counselors at risk, the literature describes symptomatology affecting every facet of their personal and professional lives (Kesler, 1990).

### *Description of Burnout*

Burnout can be described as a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, wherein the individual blames himself-not the circumstances-for his feelings, emotional and physical exhaustion, occupational fatigue, cynical attitudes, depersonalization toward or withdrawal from clients, chronic depression and/or increased anxiety (Rando, 1984). Maynard (1986) suggested that burnout also includes interpersonal conflicts and strained work relationships, low morale and productivity, physical complaints, and a strong tendency toward substance abuse.

### *Susceptibility of Guidance Counselors for Burnout*

Guidance counselors are typically known as a caring, talented, creative, and highly motivated group of professionals who use these same qualities to help young people. However, because the emotional, physical, and spiritual demands of being a counselor can be overwhelming, these same qualities place counselors in a good position to experience burnout.

### *Occupational Stress: A Cause of Burnout*

Counselors with higher levels of perceived occupational stress reported significantly greater personal strain and less coping resources than did counselors perceiving lower levels of occupational stress. Occupational stress may be a potential hazard to an individual's psychological and physical health (Murphy & Schoenborn, 1987). According to Ross, Altmaier, and Russell (1989), persons in occupations that involve providing services to others, such as counselors, are especially vulnerable to the accumulation of occupational stress and subsequent burnout. The many demands placed on counselors and the ethical dilemmas inherent in the counseling profession contribute to the occupational stress of counseling as a profession (May & Sowa, 1992).

Osipow and Spokane (1987) defined three dimensions of occupational stress: 1) occupational stress based on an individual's perceptions of stress-inducing work roles (i.e., the amount of stress arising from the individual's work environment); 2) occupationally induced strain (i.e., attitudes toward work and the degree to which one is experiencing problems in work quality and productivity, psychological distress, and physical ailments); and 3) coping resources available to counter the effects or strain of occupational stress. Schneider (1984) suggested that the physical effects of burnout may eventually climax in extreme situations and result in a heart attack, cancer, or suicide. Burke (1981, P.54) stated, "Under stressful working conditions, counselors using poor coping strategies may become disenchanted, discouraged, irritated, frustrated, and confused, resulting in poor job performance." The result is a "no-win" situation for guidance counselors, students, faculty, administration, and parents (Kesler, 1990).

Counselors who are unable to take care of their own emotional needs will have difficulty helping others.

On-going stressors and ultimately burnout is a process that occurs over time. It is scattered with the remnants of a counselor's emotional health. Helpfulness depleted leads to helplessness; strength gives way to loss of control. Guilt, anger, and anxiety result from meeting only part of many responsibilities or from not wanting to meet them at all (Kesler, 1990). Equally possible, counselors can feel incompetent, bored, irritable, depressed, and victimized (Watkins, 1983). Frazzled and worn out, burned-out counselors go about their days in an emotional fog, too tired to feel anything at all.

#### *Counselor Resources and Recovery from Burnout*

Contrary to the belief that counselors are inherently at a high risk for burnout, a study conducted by Sowa and May (1994) found that many other factors played a role in the level of counselor stress. In surveying counselor trainees, several implications were suggested as a result of their study. The interaction of the individual and the counseling environment seemed to play an important role in determining the level of counselor stress. The level of active engagement in physical and emotional resources was found to enhance and empower counselors to be more effective practitioners. The incorporation and completion of stress management courses, that were comprehensive in physical and psychological coping-skills training, within counselor education programs, may serve as a vehicle for the development of coping resources for counselor's occupational stress and personal strain from occurring. They may serve as a means of protecting against distress.

According to Kesler (1990), recovery from burnout, like healing from grief, takes time, patience, and hard work. In time, counselors can learn what combination of events

causes them stress, and they can then assess those stressors and develop action plans to combat burnout. Although the work done to alleviate burnout can be private and tedious, it requires a gentleness with self and a social support system that abides during the tough times. Burnout never occurs in a social vacuum; therefore, abiding is an important concept. Recovery from burnout is not linear and often tends toward chaos. Also important, chaos is a signal to sufferers that they are ready to gain insight, strengthen, and grow.

This field study will explore stressors that elementary school counselors have reported and ways in which these counselors effectively deal with their given stressors. The study will include both quantitative and qualitative data to indicate how elementary school counselors have indicated effective strategies to combat stressors and burnout.

#### *Purpose of Study*

The purpose of this study was to examine stressors that elementary counselors experience throughout their career and to determine what, if any, activities these counselors engage in to combat these stressors and ultimately burnout. The research objectives of this study were:

1. To determine the stressors and stressor level the counselor was currently experiencing.
2. To determine what activates the counselor was engaging in to combat work related stressors
3. To determine if there was a pattern with stressors experienced by elementary school counselors.

4. To determine if there was a pattern to combat stressors among elementary school counselors.
5. To determine how stressors affect the self-reported effectiveness and longevity of elementary school counselors.
6. To determine when stressors are most likely to occur in the career of the elementary school counselor.
7. To determine any burnout/career resiliency patterns based on geographic location of the counselor throughout the State of Wisconsin.

### *Assumptions*

At least two assumptions may be included in this study. These assumptions are:

1. Participants are able to assess the level of stress associated with various aspects of their guidance positions.
2. Participants are able to assess the ways in which they are able to combat stressors associated with their guidance positions.

### *Definition of Terms*

The diversity of counselors, their roles, and the educational jargon utilized within the profession may require further explanation. By defining some of these terms, it is the intent of this researcher to foster a better understanding of the counseling role and relationship within the elementary school setting.

**Burnout-** The exhaustion of physical or emotional strength. There are several definitions of burnout, but key words are fatigue, frustration, disengagement, stress, depletion, helplessness, hopelessness, emotional drain, emotional

exhaustion, and cynicism. Most experts agree that burnout should be considered a multidimensional syndrome.

**Elementary Counselor-** A school counselor who usually works with students in Kindergarten to Grade 6. The grade levels may vary, but usually include teaching classroom guidance lessons, facilitating small groups, and engaging students in individual counseling sessions.

**High Touch Work-** Terminology often used to refer to individuals in professions who deal with intimate emotional contact with clients.

**Resiliency-** An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.

**Stress-** A physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tensions and may be a factor in disease causation or depression.

**Stressor-** One or more factors causing stress.

### *Limitations to the Study*

Since one of the stressors that elementary school counselors face on a daily basis is limited time resources, it is likely that many counselors will fail to return the surveys. The timing of the surveys was pre-determined to align with the end of the school year, when elementary counselors could reflect on the stressors they have faced throughout the academic year. This timing was a risk the researcher took, realizing that elementary counselors may be struggling to finish end of the year reports, bringing closure to their counseling sessions, and other related duties and details.

### *Summary*

To continue to retain quality elementary school counselors, it is evident that research must be done to determine stressors that lead to burnout within these counselors.

Counselors who are experiencing burnout are often less effective than those not experiencing burnout. This study is an attempt to determine what major stressors elementary counselors in the State of Wisconsin are experiencing and what these counselors might do to combat the stressors to prolong their effectiveness as counselors and/or their counseling careers.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

This chapter will cover a review of literature in relation to strategies that lead to identification of stressors that may lead to burnout of elementary school counselors. When applicable, approaches that may enhance resiliency for those in the elementary school counseling profession will be noted.

#### *Stressors and the Work Climate*

Career (school) counselors, like teachers, nurses, social workers, and psychotherapists are members of a larger group of “high touch” (Naisbitt, 1984) professionals dedicated to the improvement of the lives of others. Despite the apparent differences between the aforementioned occupations, those within high touch fields share many personal and professional characteristics, none more fundamental than the conviction that human contact is essential to the health and well-being of individuals throughout their developmental lifespan (Skovholt, 2001).

#### *Burnout Indicators*

Burnout is a term widely used across all professions, yet the definition of burnout and its specific indicators are hard to pinpoint. Although the concept of burnout seems to be commonly understood by most, there does not seem to be one all-encompassing definition. The definition of burnout in Chapter One of this study is descriptive, yet lengthy. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the following widely accepted definition of burnout will be used: Burnout is the index of dislocation between what people are and what they have to do. It represents an erosion of values, dignity, spirit,

and will-an erosion of the human soul (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). To help the reader better understand this definition, Maslach and Leiter (1997) listed three key dimensions in which a working professional could be fully engaged or burned out:

**Fully Engaged vs. Burned out**

Energy vs Exhaustion

Involvement vs Cynicism

Efficacy vs Ineffectiveness

*Preventing Burnout in the Work Environment*

In relating the causes of burnout, Maslach and Leiter (1997) took a strong work-climate view. Rather than blaming the individual, they said that “burnout is not a problem of the people themselves but of the social environment in which people work” (p. 18). They cited six specific work environment sources of burnout: work overload, lack of control, insufficient reward, unfairness, breakdown of community, and value conflict.

Maslach and Leiter suggested that the best way to prevent burnout for those in the helping professions where the aforementioned factors are present may be to overhaul the work environment. Although the approach of overhauling the work environment may have a high degree of merit, it is also a gargantuan task. This, in turn, may also add to the stress and eventual burnout of the working counselor.

In addressing this workplace dilemma posed by Maslach and Leiter (1997, p. 149), Skovholt (2001, p. 110) suggested that the following matrix should be in place to prevent counselor burnout. This matrix helps the reader understand how the work

environment may be structured so that the counselor may experience longevity instead of burnout within the counseling role.

<b>Burnout Creation</b>	<b>vs</b>	<b>Burnout Prevention</b>
work overload	vs	sustainable workload
lack of control	vs	feelings of choice and control
insufficient reward	vs	recognition and reward
breakdown of community	vs	a sense of community
unfairness	vs	fairness, respect, and justice
significant values conflict	vs	meaningful, valued work

Skovholt (2001, p. 110) further suggested that it would be ideal if a counselor's supervisor set the tone of a positive work environment that addressed the various aspects of burnout prevention, but reminds those in the helping professions that it is ultimately up to them to create a healthy, sustaining work environment. "In the absence of psychosocial support, counselors, therapists, teachers, or health professionals must create it (a positive, healthy work environment) for themselves (Skovholt, 2001, p. 110).

#### *Relationship Between Elementary Counselors and Principals*

A very specific area of stress in the work environment, as indicated through the literature review, is the counselor's relationship with their immediate supervisor, which is usually the school principal. Research has indicated that the support of the school principal in the implementation and maintenance of guidance and counseling programs is imperative (Beale, 1995). Additionally, it has been determined that teamwork among professionals in a school, especially the crucial relationships between school counselors

and principals, is an important factor in determining the effectiveness of a comprehensive guidance and counseling program (Brock & Ponec, 1998).

The principal determines the role and function of the counselor within the school and often must be educated to that role (Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994). It may be implied that a variety of stressors are associated with the counselor/principal relationship simply by the roles and responsibilities in which the principal assigns the counselor to engage in Ribak-Rosenthal (1994) related that principals often utilized counselors in performing various clerical and administrative tasks rather than counseling duties when their own administrative positions had excessive demands. In contrast, Vaught (1995) described her experiences with her principal as supportive in the following ways: understanding the guidance and counseling program; respecting what the counselor had to say about students, curriculum, and school community; and believing that counselors and principals should work together for the benefit of the students. Principal-counselor partnerships advocated an open, supportive relationship as the foundation of an exemplary program (Cormany & Brantley, 1996). This research further implied that ignoring this relationship and the influence of the principal, regarding the implementation and maintenance of guidance and counseling program, could be disastrous.

An example of ways in which elementary counselors and their principals have different views of the counseling role follows. Cormany and Brantley (1996) viewed the role of the counselor as advocating for the child, developing appropriate curriculum, educating parents and staff on issues and trends to the student body's welfare, conflict resolution or mediation, participation in student assistance teams, awareness of technology's use in counseling, building ties with community and business, and career

development skills. In direct contrast to these counseling activities, Coll and Freeman (1997) found that elementary counselors were performing more substitute teaching, lunchroom and playground duties, and administrative tasks than considered ideal. In addition, these elementary school counselors had more roles and functions and were in less secure position (i.e. lack of funds, politics, and authority figure issues) than their middle and secondary school colleagues. All of these issues may add up to a paramount number of stressors.

Stickel (1990) suggested the role confusion regarding counseling duties is due to the diverse training of principals and counselors. Several suggestions were offered to limit role confusion and increase professional identification of school counselors. First, elementary counselors should clarify their role and communicate that administrative and/or clerical duty assignment is not cost effective (Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994). Second, principals, as the main influence and support of exemplary programs, must be educated on the appropriate role and duties of a counselor (Ponec & Dickel, 1991). Third, elementary counselors need to actively demonstrate “how their work contributes to the overall school environment and the development of students” by offering greater documentation of the effectiveness and success of school guidance and counseling programs (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994). All of these factors may help to alleviate stressors of the elementary counselor as their role and job expectation become more clearly defined.

One way stressors resulting from role confusion between the elementary counselor and principal may be alleviated is through frequent and established communication. Communication between counselors and their principals assists in

establishing a workable role and implementing effective programs for students, families, and staff. Counselors need to become proficient at communicating their professional training to principals, staff, and school communities. In addition, communication that focuses on appropriate and inappropriate counseling activities and adherence to the role outlined by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 1990) should be emphasized (Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994).

Another suggestion by Ribak-Rosenthal (1994) included consistent communication and frequent documentation of guidance and counseling activities, which would aid principals in evaluating the effectiveness of school guidance and counseling programs. Furthermore, when the principal is kept apprised of counseling activities offered within the elementary guidance program, it protects him or her from unpleasant surprises that may result from being too far removed from guidance activities and also provides concrete evidence documenting program results.

Some other suggestions reported in this study (Ponec & Brock, 2000) that seemed to alleviate some stressors between counselors and principals included establishing a daily routine or procedure for communication. This procedure did not eliminate hallway or doorway conversations, but appeared more effective than laissez faire approaches in place for some elementary counselor/principal teams. Some counselors reported that written logs or other pen and paper daily communication systems facilitated a better communication with their principals, which in turn cut down on stressors that occurred when communication systems were poor or nonexistent.

Regardless of what system of communication is developed between the principal and elementary counselor, Ribak-Rosenthal (1994) concluded that it is apparent that

some system needs to be set in place. The school counselor and principal may wish to experiment with a variety of communication methods and find way(s) which are most effective for their specific needs. With a communication system in place, it appears as if many of the minor day-to-day stressors brought on by poor communication can be reduced or possibly even eliminated.

#### Burnout: A Multi-Modal Approach to Assessment and Resolution

Another way to address the issue of burnout in elementary counseling is to view the work environment from a multi-modal approach. Guidance counselors are especially susceptible and do suffer from the signs and consequences of burnout (Kesler, 1990) because of the nature of their work. Signs that this stress is developing into burnout include a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, exhaustion, and occupational fatigue. One may become cynical, experience chronic depression, and/or increased anxiety (Rando, 1984). Strained work relationships can lead to interpersonal conflicts, low morale, and low productivity. Counselors may begin to complain of physical pain and/or begin abusing substances (Maynard, 1986).

In an article reviewing approaches to deal with the assessment and resolution of counselor burnout, Kesler (1990) outlined her findings in utilizing Lazarus's BASIC I.D. (1976). BASIC I.D. stands for Behavior, Affect, Sensation, Imagery, Cognition, and Interpersonal Relationships, and Drugs/Biology. In this summary, Kesler (1990) contended that, "The crux of this framework is that human beings are multidimensional in their experience of life. The function on many levels that overlap/emotions affect thought, images affect behavior, sensations affect physical health, and so forth." Lazarus

applied the “ripple effect” to the assessment and treatment of dysfunctions and thereby developed a flexible and easily managed way to give comprehensive care.

Burnout occurs over time and recovery from burnout takes time, patience, and hard work (Kessler, 1990). Through this hard work, counselors can identify, assess, and develop action plans to combat stress leading to burnout.

Kessler suggested that counselors utilize Lazarus’ BASIC I.D., which may be helpful in treating themselves for burnout. The following is an outline of BASIC I.D.: however, it is important to note that symptoms may generalize over various modalities, as can the various solutions and interventions. The following section will explain the seven areas of Lazarus’ BASIC I.D. and give some insights into steps an elementary counselor may take to postpone or prevent burnout within their career.

#### Behavior

Guidance counselors stay busy. Counselors are often required to work with large and diverse populations of students, staff, parents, and community members. They are asked to assess problems, develop treatment plans, do referrals, do classroom guidance, handle some staff development, work with individuals and groups, interact with Parent Teacher Associations, and act as mediators in crisis situations, serve as a consultant to teachers and other school staff, and the like. In addition, counselors face demands from the administration to prove that they have met behavioral objectives by doing untold amounts of paperwork (Hassard, 1981). New tasks are often added to their already overburdened schedules. This business can result in role overload, role conflict, and role ambiguity (Moracco, Butchke & McEwen, 1984).

In reaction, counselors often drive faster, become clock-watchers and complainers, and get less done or do what they do less efficiently (Watkins, 1993). They find it difficult to prioritize because nothing can be eliminated from their schedules. Time management skills are depleted, along with their energy.

Nicholson and Golsan (1983) have suggested the following behavioral interventions: 1) define goals, 2) educate service populations about services that counselors will provide, 3) periodically assess and modify role obligations, 4) prioritize counseling duties while limiting noncounseling duties, and 5) plan leisure time.

One way to define goals is to keep a daily log of stressors encountered, the manner of coping, and the success or failure of these strategies (Pines & Aronson, 1981). Hassard (1981) has encouraged counselors to get individual and group therapy to explore what stresses are manageable and where to set limits.

“Successful living involves taking responsibility for your life, changing what can be changed and accepting what cannot...earn the courage to imperfect because perfection is not possible.” (Carlson, 1979, p. 88). Counselors can learn to manage time by following five procedure: analyzing their time (time study), setting goals, prioritizing tasks, delegating responsibilities, and taking action to do it (Casteel & Mathews, 1984).

To handle paperwork and accountability, counselors must work directly with the administration to define measurable goals and procedures. It is important to note that all consequences of counseling cannot be measured. Integral to the counselor-client relationship is something that defies quantification—a healing quotient (Kesler, 1990). Counselors must be aware that there is more to the job that can be counted or quantified on a list.

## Affect

The road to burnout is scattered with the remnants of a counselor's emotional health. Helpfulness depleted leads to helplessness; strength gives way to loss of control. Guilt, anger, and anxiety result from meeting only part of the many responsibilities or from not wanting to meet them at all. Equally possible, counselors can feel incompetent, bored, irritable, depressed, and victimized (Watkins, 1983). Frazzled and worn out, burned-out counselors go about their days in emotional fog, too tired to feel anything at all.

The affective modality carries the burden and the hope of intervention. Field, McCabe, and Schneiderman (1985) described the hope, optimism, and joy Lazarus explained in his summation of the affective modality:

“They can act as “breather,” allowing the person to take a break from the demands of active coping. They can act as “restorers” of depleted sources and they can act as “sustainers” of action, causing people to persist in their coping efforts even when situations become extremely demanding and taxing” (Field, McCabe, and Schneiderman., 1985, p. 325).

These positive emotions provide hope to grow and a necessary ingredient for healing. It is necessary to get in touch with the anger, the anxiety, and the boredom to explore why they are bothersome and what to do about them. Individual and group therapy and peer support groups can provide this opportunity (Rando, 1984).

Emotions need an outlet. Humor can release the stress and serves as a safeguard against buildup. Tears can do the same thing. Counselors can give themselves permission and a safe place to express their emotions. Many counselors find ways to express themselves such as journaling, painting, or some other form of creative expressions.

### Sensory

Sensory perception depends on the proper functioning of the body's physical systems. Casteel and Matthews (1984) described the body's reaction to stress as a "general adaptation syndrome." When the body senses emotional threat, the alarm reaction is automatically triggered as a survival tactic. The pupils of the eye dilate, the blood rushes to the limbs to fight or flee, and the heart beats faster as adrenalin is released. If the stress does not disappear, the body enters the resistant stage to recover from the initial bout with stress and to endure the stress to come. This stage continues to deplete physical and psychological resources. If there is no relief and the individual cannot manage the stress, he enters exhaustion. Exhaustion signals a depletion of all internal resources, despite old and new sources of stress continuing to confront the system.

This model explains the cumulative nature of stress and burnout. It provides insight on why burnout victims feel so exhausted and seemed plagued by illness, muscle aches, upset stomachs, colds, clumsiness, PMS, overeating and eyestrain (Casteel & Matthews, 1984). Counselors may experience the increased need for sensory over stimulation, or both as chronic stress turns to burnout.

Relation training can provide counselors with the skills to slow down or even prevent the alarm reaction that may lead to stress and burnout. Neuromuscular massage, a form of sensory therapy, can help satisfy “skin hunger,” offer emotional reassurance, help relieve physical problems, and also be nurturing (Casteel & Mathew, 1984). Massage therapy is designed to relieve muscle tension and pain, and it can coincidentally release emotions and thoughts that the body somaticized (Carnahan, 1985).

Music, art, and dance therapies and meditational exercises such as yoga and centering have been used to combat sensory stress reductions (Hendricks & Roberts, 1977). Regular physical examinations are recommended whenever physical problems exist.

### Imagery

Professional helpers plague themselves, with the help from culture, by internalizing a “helper persona” (Kesler, 1990). According to Hoffer (1981, p. 49),

Once the label of the “expert” is attached, it can be allowed to have an oppressive impact on human well being (of the counselor). Once the professional cloak of helper is donned, it becomes increasingly difficult to ask for help since one is perceived as weak if needing it. It is much more comfortable to be on the counseling side.

In this situation, the counselor has become his or her job and has lost all boundaries between their personal and professional self. Counselors may keep this a “hidden secret” from others and this confidentiality complicates a healthy resolution.

Nelson (1988) has proposed the use of right hemisphere activities (imagination, perspective, and intuition) as guides for correcting these faulty images. Counselors may also develop a degree of balanced detachment from their jobs by finding a personal

identity elsewhere in their lives (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980). At the same time, counselors need to educate the public about the proper use of counselor's skills. By doing so, they help to create realistic expectations that in turn have a self-fulfilling prophecy effect on the helpers themselves.

### Cognition

Burned-out counselors manifest cognitive stress through self-criticism, pessimism, learned helplessness, disorganized thinking, defensiveness, perfectionism, detachment, paranoia, and suicidal ideation (Field, McCabe & Schneiderman, 1985). What they have to do must be done perfectly: students deserve the best, and administration demands it. Counselors become prisoners of their thoughts and victims of the system.

Many counselors receive mixed messages from students and staff members. These double-blind situations often result from contradictory thoughts or messages that are received from the individuals in which they serve. According to Meier and Davis (1982, pp. 13-14), these thoughts include, "I will not threaten the boss (or client) too much by my competence." Meier and Davis (1982) further noted that generally, "school counselors are very competent and should consistently present themselves in that manner"

To relieve cognitive stress, counselors must acknowledge their limits, clarify values, set goals, and find private time for self-regulation (Watkins, 1983). Methods for developing these skills include cognitive restructuring (Casteel & Matthews, 1984), decompression routines (Rando, 1984), fantasy/brainstorming (Nelson, 1988), and spiritual or philosophical development (Carlson, 1979).

### Interpersonal Relationships

Counselors are natural helpers, and for one reason or another often refuse or deflect assistance. When in need of aid, they are unable to muster the energy to develop a support system (Nicholson & Golsan, 1983), or they withdraw from the people (friends, family, and colleagues) who can help them.

Counselors' relationships with school personnel may be strained, because they perceive a lack of appreciation and understanding from them (Moracco, Butchke & McEwen, 1984). Students may sense the counselor's tension and thereby discontinue treatment (Hassard, 1981). It may also be possible that the counselors have been doing "mate therapy" on their spouses and have "treated" themselves out of support at home (Watkins, 1983). In essence, the counselor has a very public persona, yet can be extremely isolated.

Counselors must learn to receive help as well as give it, seeking balance in that as in all things. Developing social skills aids in the formation of mature relationships and assertiveness training can protect that newfound interdependence. Family relations may also require time and therapy (Gold, 1985).

In helping school personnel identify their staff needs and then in facilitating interventions, counselors develop baseline support for their functions. Supported school professionals may well, in turn, become supportive ones (Kesler, 1990).

Counselors also need to develop peer support groups that offer safe conduct through burnout and recovery. Important elements of that peer support group include listening, providing technical challenge, being emotionally supportive, challenging one emotionally, and providing social reality (Pines & Aronson, 1981).

## Drugs and Biology

Because there is so much to do, guidance counselors may pay little attention to their personal needs. Overwhelming stress often travels inward when denied release. Sporadic or consistent aches and pains may occur.

Burned-out counselors may not eat right, not sleep well, drink or smoke too much, and/or develop ulcers or other ailments from abuse (Gherman, 1981). Often times people under stress use drugs or alcohol to alleviate that stress. As the frequency and intensity of the stress increases, the use of these substances increases as well (Filmian, Zacherman, & McHardy 1985).

High-risk individuals must pay proper attention to a healthy diet, get adequate rest, and exercise on a regular, noncompetitive basis (Girando & Everly, 1979). Relaxation exercises and meditation aid resolution as a stillness is cultivated from within.

According to Rando (1984, p. 286):

We need to be sure to allow ourselves time for doing those things that we really enjoy. It is important to escape our responsibilities and give ourselves a chance to play, either alone or with others. We need to engage in life-affirming activities. Social and emotional refreshment is a necessary requirement: we need to be given to, as well as to give. In fact, we need to be nurtured by others if we are to continue being caring ourselves.

According to Lazarus BASIC I.D., the assessment and treatment of school counselor burnout is not simple. A variety of causes and symptoms lead to the need for a multi-dimensional action plan. Using the BASIC I.D. plan touches on self-care for the counselor in most areas, however, it is a plan that needs to be adapted to the individual

elementary school counselor. If the counselor is resilient in taking care of himself and exploring the various modalities pointed out in the BASIC I.D. plan, it is more likely they will continue to be an effective school counselor. Counselors cannot be all things to all people. They can, however, be true to themselves. In resolving burnout, they grow and heal: and once again they can illuminate the world inside and around them (Kesler, 1984).

### Summary

The literature reveals a large variety of stressors that may affect the elementary counselor throughout their career. Veteran counselor practitioners, like veteran athletes need to learn to pace themselves, always being ready at critical moments, but also being able to pull back in noncritical moments. By continually monitoring their levels of stress and developing a self-care plan, school counselors may be able to develop and maintain their roles as resilient practitioners.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe elementary school counselor's perceptions of the stressors present in their daily work environment and to find out how they combat these stressors.

The objectives of this study were two-fold: 1) to determine the stressors and stressor level the individual counselor was currently experiencing and the activities they were engaging in to combat these stressors, and 2) to determine if there was a pattern of stressors among the sample group of elementary counselors and ways in which they combated stressors to become more resilient counselors.

A Likert Scale (Appendix A) was developed by the researcher to gather information regarding stressors that elementary school counselors may experience on the job and ways in which these counselors deal with the said stress. The survey consisted of 30 questions and was split in two parts, divided on two different pages. Page one of the survey asked the counselors to assess 12 different areas of potential stress on a scale of one to five. Questions 13-16 allowed survey participants to list additional stressors that may not have been listed specifically in the instrument. These questions were assessed and addressed in a separate section in Chapter Four.

The second part of the survey listed 14 questions that addressed ways in which the specific elementary school counselor engaged in methods to combat the stressors listed on the previous page (i.e. resiliency). Similar to the first section of this instrument, survey participants were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 the effectiveness of the listed practices in being a more resilient counselor practitioner. Questions 17-28 listed specific ways in which the counselor may deal with stressors in his/her life, while questions 28-30 allowed the survey participant to list additional stress relief mechanisms they may engage in to promote resiliency within their profession.

### *Participants*

The surveys were sent to 100 elementary school counselors across the State of Wisconsin. Counselors were randomly selected from various school districts utilizing the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) School Directory. Furthermore, the counselors selected for this study had primary responsibility as a Kindergarten through grade 6 Elementary Counselor. Although the said counselors' responsibility varied from K-3, K-4, K-5, and K-6, the consistent factor was that their primary responsibility was that of an elementary school counselor. The number of surveys were distributed equally among counselors in school districts of varying size. Random selection of counselor participants were made on an equal basis from large (above 750 enrollment) medium (250-749 enrollment) and small (249-below enrollment) school districts. Whenever possible, the researcher also attempted to send surveys to different geographical regions throughout the state, to create a more diverse sampling of counselors.

In the spring of 2001, the survey was mailed to the selected elementary counselors. The nature and rationale of the study was explained in the introduction/cover letter of the written instrument. The content of the survey included two separate Likert Scales. In the first scale, respondents were requested to indicate stressors they were experiencing in their work environment and the level at which they were experiencing these stressors. The second Likert Scale asked these elementary counselors to indicate ways in which they engaged in relieving stress and the effectiveness level of these stress relievers.

Survey participants were also asked whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up telephone interview. A section of the cover letter allowed participants to indicate their telephone numbers and times they wished to be contacted.

#### *Research Procedure*

The researcher provided participants with packets that included a self-addressed stamped envelope, a cover letter explaining the nature of the study, how to contact the researcher if any questions arose, and an informed consent sheet. Within the cover letter, participants had an opportunity to check a box if they were interested in being contacted by telephone for a follow-up interview. The two surveys were also included within this packet. After the consent form and surveys were completed, participants were asked to return all materials to the researcher in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided.

#### *Data Analysis*

The information that the elementary school counselors provided was examined to determine their perspectives regarding their individual stressors relating to their work

environment and the ways in which they combated these stressors. The researcher analyzed each instrument separately and made a variety of comparison and assessments.

*Summary*

An introduction to the methodology utilized throughout this study has been presented in Chapter Three. The findings relating to the research questions are discussed in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### *Introduction*

The objectives of this study were to survey a cross-section of elementary guidance counselors throughout the State of Wisconsin and determine the various stressors in their work environment and how they engage these stressors in their daily lives to combat burnout and/or achieve resiliency. This chapter presents information relating significant patterns of data that elementary counselors have related as significant stressors within their work environment.

The following charts list how the 58 participants who completed the two surveys responded to the corresponding questions. A discussion regarding trends and tendencies of responses is presented later in this chapter.

#### **Survey One: Stressors That May Be Experienced By Elementary Counselors**

*Respondents were instructed:*

Please rate the following areas of potential stress on a scale of 1-5. Circling a 1 would mean this area causes little or no stress to you, while a 5 would mean this area is extremely stressful for you as a counselor. *Results follow:*

Total Potential Stressors Stress Level	Little or No Stress		Moderate Stressors		Extremely Stressful
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Paperwork or documentation	6	15	23	13	1
2. Dealing with teacher or staff relations	5	19	22	9	3
3. Parental contact and family interventions	4	11	17	23	3
4. Filling in/assisting in non-counselor roles	19	18	12	5	4
5. Juggling activities	6	16	17	17	2

6. Caseload is too overwhelming	2	8	13	15	20
7. Setting priorities on daily activities	10	20	20	6	2
8. Conflict between classroom guidance and individual counseling	10	18	12	17	1
9. Issues surrounding confidentiality	16	16	13	7	6
10. School climate issues	9	15	16	14	4
11. Crisis intervention	5	15	15	20	3
12. Inner turmoil within one's self when dealing with abuse/neglect issues	12	19	9	11	7

### *Results from Survey One*

After analyzing the results from Survey One, it was concluded that three stressors in the work lives of the elementary school counselors surveyed were indicated as highly stressful to extremely stressful. It was also concluded that four areas of previously identified stressors had little or no stress for a majority of the survey respondents.

The number one stressor (60.3%) of those surveyed was indicated as their “caseload is too overwhelming.” The next highest stressor (44.8%) for those surveyed was indicated as “parental contact and family interventions.” The third highest stressor (39.7%) indicated by Survey One Participants was “crisis intervention.”

Results showed that there were four areas that survey participants indicated caused little or no stress or mild stress in their working lives. More than half (63.8%) of elementary counselors indicated that there was little, mild, or no stress in the area of “filling in for teachers/assisting in non-counselor roles.” Over 50% of the counselors surveyed indicated that they had none to mild stress in the area of “issues regarding confidentiality.” More than 53% of counselors indicated that they experience little or no

stress with “inner turmoil within one’s self when dealing with abuse/neglect issues.” The last area which indicated a significant lack of stress included 51.7% of elementary counselors who had little difficulty “setting priorities on a daily basis.”

The significant data relating to Survey One indicated that elementary school counselors surveyed seemed most stressed out about overwhelming caseloads, situations which required parental contact and family interventions, and crisis intervention situations. These same counselors indicated that the following work tasks were less significant in creating stress: filling in/assisting in non-counseling roles, issues surrounding confidentiality, inner turmoil regarding abuse/neglect issues, and setting priorities on daily activities.

### **Survey Two: Ways in Which I Deal With Stress**

*Respondents were instructed to:*

Please rate the following ways in which you deal with stress. Circling a 1 would indicate that you have not tried this method of stress relief in the past or that it has been ineffective. Marking a 5 would mean that you have found this to be a very effective method of stress relief. *Results follow:*

Methods of Stress Relief	Not Effective or Have Not Tried		Moderately Effective		Very Effective Method
	1	2	3	4	5
Stress Level					
17. Regular exercise, such as walking or jogging or weight lifting	4	3	7	17	27
18. Talking about your stressor with family members	4	11	15	20	8
19. Engaging in a hobby or non-work related interest	0	3	10	25	20
20. Taking part in physical activities such as gardening, lawn maintenance or related projects	5	10	10	19	14
21. Volunteering time to a group or organization	11	21	14	11	1
22. Talking about your stressors with another counselor or co-worker	0	7	14	23	14

23. Taking short vacations, getting away from it all	6	5	9	14	24
24. Journaling or writing about your stressors	26	9	13	8	2
25. Knowing your limits. Knowing when to not take on any more activities/responsibilities	1	2	14	20	21
26. Reading	6	7	15	16	14
27. Spending time with or talking to friends	1	2	10	22	23

### Results from Survey Two

After analyzing the results from Survey Two, it can be concluded that there are four areas of stress relievers that are significant aspects of these counselor's regular regime. Over three-fourths (77.6%) of respondents indicated that a good stress reliever for them was "spending time with or talking with friends." The same amount of participants (77.6%) also indicated that they "engage in a hobby or non-work related interest" as a stress reliever. "Regular exercise, such as walking or jogging or weight lifting" was reported as a very effective stress relief method for 75.8% of elementary counselors surveyed. "Knowing when not to take on any more activities/responsibilities" was indicated as another stress reliever for 70.7% of elementary counselors surveyed.

There were also two specific areas that these counselors have found not to be effective stress relievers. "Journaling or writing about your stressors" was not an effective method of stress relief for 60.3% of those surveyed. The other significant area these counselors indicated as an ineffective tool as a stress reliever was "volunteering time to a group or organization" (55.1%).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations

#### *Self-Care and Burnout Prevention Strategies*

**Experience is a good teacher, but she sends in terrific bills.**

-Anonymous

#### Introduction

This chapter includes a summary of the research project, conclusions of the study and a variety of recommendations. This chapter further outlines 20 different hazards that counselors may incur throughout their career. These hazards were laid out in Skovholt (2001, p. 77-105) and would be an excellent topic to pursue in further research that studies trends in counselor burnout.

#### Hazards to the Counselor Practitioner

For veteran practitioners, there often are especially difficult incidents over the years of practice that lead to a loss of innocence. Very traumatic incidents, such as the suicide of a client, are extremely stressful and at the time may bring on daydreams of other occupations choices. Skovholt (2001, p. 105) reflected, "What are the lessons learned from these incidents? For one, practice can wound the practitioner. Often the vulnerability is unknown. The person (counselor) may not have known before that a field that can do so much good can also wound its practitioners."

High touch work means making a highly skilled professional attachment, involvement, and separation over and over again. What makes this work most difficult and those in it prone to stressors or burnout? Skovholt (2001, p. 77) stated, "It often has

to do with expectations with our hope to make a difference, with our ability to tolerate so much ambiguity, with the distress we vicariously feel from those we attempt to assist.

What are the hazards that make work difficult with clients, students and patients?"

Skovholt outlined the twenty hazards of practice in the Resilient Practitioner (2001, p. 77-102). Specific hazards are listed verbatim from this text, while the accompanying summaries are made by this researcher.

Hazard 1: Clients have an unsolvable problem that must be solved.

When individuals are stuck in or with certain problems, it is easy for them to fall into some degree of panic or despair. This usually makes it difficult for those in the helping professions to have an impact on this condition, especially in a quick way.

Hazard 2: They are not "honor students."

Honor students can get better, improve and learn anywhere. Often the students elementary counselors work with are resistant learners who have a history of poor home lives and limited resources. These students often require a great deal of creativity, resources and time, all of which tap into the limited resources of the counselor.

Hazard 3: They have motivational conflicts.

Often times students simply don't want to be working with the elementary counselor. They may have been referred to the counselor for academic, social, or disciplinary reasons.

Other motivational conflicts include students being sent to the counselor by others such as parents, other teachers, the principal or even the court system.

Hazard 4: There is often a readiness gap between them and us.

The goal of the elementary counselor is generally to facilitate improvement. In many instances there may be a developmental (physical, emotional, or psychological) reason the

student is not ready to address a certain issue. The counselor must keep in mind, the student's level of commitment, readiness to deal with the task at hand and developmental level when working with each student on specific issues.

Hazard 5: Sometimes the project negative feelings onto us.

In many cases students carry "baggage" or painful feelings from experiences with adults in their past. Often times students transfer this intense pain, hurt anger or fear on to unsuspecting and counselors. It can be especially difficult to understand the transference element brought on from these students and not be personally hurt.

Hazard 6: Sometimes we cannot help because we are not good enough.

The gap between their needs and the competence of the counselor simply may not fit. Demographics, life experiences or even competence level may be some of the areas where counselors do not meet the needs of their student clients. This may be difficult for the counselor to accept since their appears to be an inherent need to feel that one is making a positive difference in the lives of students.

Hazard 7: They have needs greater than the social service, educational, or health system can meet.

With the diversity of needs of students and the apparent continued trend toward limited school resources, it is inevitable that certain student needs will not be able to be met.

Difficult clients can be those who fail because the system does not provide enough resources for success.

Hazard 8: Our inability to say "no" to the treadmill effect.

The practitioner tries to keep up with constant demands by running faster and faster. Soon the pace is dizzying, and the surroundings blur. The practitioner gets numb and

can't think or process experience or feedback. On the treadmill, the pace just seems to increase. This major stressor concerns our desire to help, our difficulty in saying no, and the resulting overload (Skovholt, 2001, p. 83).

Hazard 9: Living in an ocean of stress emotions.

Counselors often work with those who are experiencing some kind of difficulty. It may be a physical, academic, or emotional problem. Confusion, frustration, discouragement, anxiety, and anger are common. It is easy for the counselor to get caught up in the student's ocean of emotions. Often people seek out counselors only when they can't solve problems by themselves. Students or clients may have unsolvable problems that must be solved. This leads to demoralized helplessness that can take a toll not only on students, but also on their counselors.

Hazard 10: Ambiguous professional loss-ending before the ending.

This can mean a variety of things to the practitioner. In one sense, it can be the counselor has reached ultimate burnout and is just going through the emotions. In another sense, it could also mean that counselor is not able to "reap the fruits of their labors." In working with clients long-term on specific issues, the counselors may not ever see the solution come to fruition. The client's issue may be solved (often as a direct result from counseling received by that elementary counselor) after they have moved on the next school or academic level.

Hazard 11: The covert nature of the work.

This hazard includes the very nature of counseling. As part of the counseling process, confidentiality is of paramount importance. Counselors are unable to share professional concerns with family or friends. Likewise, they are unable to share their successes,

failures, frustrations, and confusions with co-workers, friends or family members. The value of social support, connection, and understanding as ways to reduce work stress gets greatly compromised in the counseling field.

Hazard 12: Constant empathy, interpersonal sensitivity, and one-way caring.

Individuals in the high touch professions are successful mainly because they can do “high touch”-relate to others by way of expert people skills. This work takes a great deal of effort. The counselor must concentrate, be involved and work at it until near or even total depletion. By exhibiting interpersonal sensitivity requires that the counselor understand the complexity of human relationships including such concepts as projections and transference (Skovholt, 2001, p. 91).

Hazard 13: Elusive measures of success

In complex, ambiguous caring for others, it is difficult to gauge success. In some professions such as farming, efforts produce direct results. On the other hand, counselors rarely learn if the techniques and efforts they have invested in their clients came to fruition. Professional stress comes in part, due to the elusiveness of concrete results and the difficulty in measuring direct success.

Hazard 14: Normative failure.

One of the most frustrating parts of being a school counselor is the often-desperate search for concrete standards of success versus failure. Often times there is anxiety related to this quest. “Am I doing a god job?” Other questions such as, “What impact am I making on students,” must be addressed by the counselor. If the counselor gets a sense that s/he is not making an impact on students, staff and administration, the normative failure that is internalized may lead to greater and greater stress as their counseling career progresses.

Hazard 15: Regulation oversight and control by external, often unknown others.

Counselors are faced with a hierarchy of supervisors including principals, district administrators and the school board. Counselors are also in a unique position to be under direct scrutiny from students, parents and other community members. Furthermore, school counselors are governed by specific sets of ethical and legal standards regarding counseling techniques, confidentiality and the like. It is nearly impossible to keep all of these groups of individuals satisfied at any one time. A school counselor must ensure that they are following legal and ethical guidelines at all times, work with the various levels of supervision and at the same time make sure all “publics” needs are being addressed. It is easy to note how the various stressors come into play juggling all of the people the counselor is directly and indirectly responsible to.

Hazard 16: Cognitive deprivation and boredom

This hazard applies more to the veteran counselor than the young counselor experiencing the position early in their career. An analogy that could be implied is, “Does a veteran counselor with 20 years of experience approach a counseling situation and their daily routine problem-solving with 20 years of experience, or do they approach it as having one year of experience 20 times?” Often times the latter may cause a fresh prospective, even for the veteran counselor.

With boredom, there is a lack of novelty to stimulate the practitioner. It is up to the counselor to find small and large challenges that will stimulate them professionally, emotionally, physically and psychologically. In these ways, stressors and burnout may be delayed or even avoided.

Hazard 17: Cynical, critical, and negative colleagues and managers.

Hazard 17: Cynical, critical, and negative colleagues and managers.

The work of a school counselor can be hard, and those people counselors work with can stress them out. With a support work group and good administrator or principal, the job can be positive and fulfilling. When colleagues are negative and/or the boss is incompetent, the reality is that the work environment is more burdensome. Cynicism and negativity eat away at the fabric of a positive work environment.

Hazard 18: Legal and ethical fears.

It is important to note that legal and ethical complaints have been nurtured by illegal and unethical behavior of practitioners in the counseling field. Misuse of power to meet one's own needs, general incompetence, and other unethical behaviors are not to be tolerated. This category is listed to address the wider arena of potential legal and ethical complaints and instances where the practitioner is wrongly accused. (Skovholt, 2001, p. 100).

Hazard 19: Practitioner emotional trauma

Skovholt reports this type of trauma as secondary trauma. After hearing reports of sexual or physical assaults, suicidal attempts or ideation, abuse and neglect for a duration of time, it is bound to affect the practitioner. Terminology often used to describe this day in and day out counselor experience with client trauma is called vicarious dramatization. Counselors need to develop networks and relationships in which they can discuss their emotional trauma.

## Hazard 20: Practitioner physical trauma.

Sometimes things go beyond severe emotional overload, the ocean of negative emotions, ambiguous professional loss, and lead to the point where the practitioner is actually physically traumatized. In researching this topic, Guy and his colleagues (Guy, Brown & Poelstra, 1992) discovered that 40 percent of their 750 predominately full-time practitioners had been physically attacked by clients during their career. A full 49 percent had received serious verbal threats against their health and safety. The key point in this hazard is for counselors to realize that they are at risk for physical trauma by their clientele. It appears that no segment of the counseling work force is exempt from threats and acts of physical violence and trauma.

### *Resiliency*

One could describe the self as composed of parts, with each part needing nurturing by the counselor. These parts are described as the emotional self, the financial self, the humorous self, the loving self, the nutritious self, the physical self, the playful self, the priority-setting self, the recreational self, the relaxation-stress reaction self, the solitary self, and the spiritual or religious self (Skovholt, 2001, p. 148).

Counselors need to acknowledge that what is good for others is good for ourselves. Psychotherapists have led the way in emotional self-care through the concept of “therapy for the therapist.” In a like manner, counselors need to seek counseling when stressors build up and appear overwhelming.

By taking care of individual needs for self (listed above), counselors are taking steps to become resilient practitioners. Counselors need to be assertive about their own wellness. One way of conceptualizing this involves four dimensions of health and the

balance between them: physical health, emotional/social health, intellectual health, and spiritual health (Skovholt, 2001, p. 162). If one were to imagine a diamond standing on end with each of the four points represented by one of the four dimensions of health. The diamond and its four dimensions help one to see the need for a focus on the dynamic interplay between them. The diamond symbolizes the reality that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Yet, the whole is strong only by attending to each dimension: physical, emotional/social health, intellectual health and spiritual health.

### Recommendations

There are several recommendations that can be offered by the researcher to enhance similar studies that promote elementary counselor resiliency in the future. To further understand the effects of stress in the working lives of elementary counselors and research methods of reducing these stressors that will add to counselor resiliency, the following recommendations for future studies are suggested:

1. The number of participants involved in the study should be increased. Over 100 surveys were mailed and 58 returned. This researcher feels 100 participants would have been a more representative sample of Wisconsin Elementary Counselors. By mailing out an additional number of surveys or timing the survey mailing differently, a higher response number may be attained.
2. Throughout this study a Likert Scale was utilized. This does not allow the respondent to give additional feedback regarding why they scored their answers in the given manner. By allowing space for respondents to comment on why they responded in a given way, the researcher may further be able to draw conclusion from this additional qualitative data.

3. Surveys were sent to respondents throughout the State of Wisconsin. Efforts were made to keep data on respondent's geographic location. Due to the low number of responses, however, no specific data trends were found. If the number of respondents increases in future studies, it may be beneficial to track how elementary counselors responded to the various stressors by geographic region, making comparisons, when appropriate.

### Conclusions

The research in Chapter IV has shown that there are several specific stressors prevalent in the lives of the elementary school counselors surveyed for this field study. It can also be surmised that there is a tendency to utilize certain techniques for stress reduction by these same counselors.

This research project shows that there are a variety of stressors in the working lives of elementary counselors and that there is no one approach to reduce the stress level or promote positive mental health within these individuals. It is important to note, however, that utilizing some means of working through these stressors is essential to prevent counselor burnout and promote resiliency in the working careers of these elementary school counselors.

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### Stressor That May Be Experienced By Elementary Counselors

Please rate the following areas of potential stress on a scale of 1 – 5. Circling a 1 would mean this area causes little or not stress to you, while a 5 would mean this area is extremely stressful for you as a school counselor.

Potential Stressors	Little or No Stress	Moderate Stressors		Extremely Stressful	
1. Paperwork or documentation	1	2	3	4	5
2. Dealing with teacher or staff relations	1	2	3	4	5
3. Parental contacts and family interventions	1	2	3	4	5
4. Filling in/assisting in non-counselor roles (ex. Filling in as a substitute teacher or administrator)	1	2	3	4	5
5. Juggling activities (going from activity to activity to activity)	1	2	3	4	5
6. Caseload is too overwhelming (not able to meet individual student needs)	1	2	3	4	5
7. Setting priorities on daily activities (weighing which activity will have the most impact)	1	2	3	4	5
8. Conflict between classroom guidance and individual counseling	1	2	3	4	5
9. Issues surrounding confidentiality (when and to whom to report confidential matters)	1	2	3	4	5
10. School climate issues	1	2	3	4	5
11. Crisis intervention	1	2	3	4	5
12. Inner turmoil within one's self when dealing with abuse/neglect issues.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Other (please specify) _____	1	2	3	4	5
14. Other (please specify) _____	1	2	3	4	5
15. Other (please specify) _____	1	2	3	4	5
16. Other (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5

## Ways In Which I Deal With Stress

Please rate the following ways in which you deal with stress. Circling a 1 would indicate that you have not tried this method of stress relief in the past or that it has been ineffective. Marking a 5 would mean that you have found this to be a very effective method of stress relief.

Methods of Stress Relief	Not Effective or Have Not Tried		Moderately Effective		Very Effective Method
	1	2	3	4	5
17. Regular exercise, such as walking or jogging or weight lifting	1	2	3	4	5
18. Talking about your stressor with family members	1	2	3	4	5
19. Engaging in a hobby or non-work related interest	1	2	3	4	5
20. Taking part in physical activities such as gardening, lawn maintenance or related projects	1	2	3	4	5
21. Volunteering time to a group or organization	1	2	3	4	5
22. Talking about your stressors with another counselor or co-worker	1	2	3	4	5
23. Taking short vacations, getting away from it all	1	2	3	4	5
24. Journaling or writing about your stressors	1	2	3	4	5
25. Knowing your limits. Knowing when to not take on any more activities/responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5
26. Reading	1	2	3	4	5
27. Spending time with or talking to friends	1	2	3	4	5
28. Other (please specify) _____	1	2	3	4	5
29. Other (please specify) _____	1	2	3	4	5
30. Other (please specify) _____	1	2	3	4	5

Dear Elementary School Counselor:

I am a graduate student enrolled in the Educational Specialist in Counseling and Psychological Services Program, with an emphasis in School Counseling at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. As part of my studies, I am completing a field study designed to solicit information regarding stressors faced on a daily basis by elementary school counselors. The focus of this study not only involves finding areas of stress involved in the daily routine of school counselors, but also solicits information about ways in which these counselors deal with stress.

Data gathered will be summarized and sent back to all survey participants. When the field study is completed information regarding counseling stressors and resiliency will also be shared with University of Wisconsin Schools that offer training in the area of school counseling. By completing this study, you will benefit directly by receiving results regarding stressors and resiliency information from the sample group of elementary school counselors.

### Consent Form

I understand that by returning this questionnaire, I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in this study. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I also understand the potential benefits that might be realized from the successful completion of this study. I am aware that the information is being sought in a specific manner so that no identifiers are needed and confidentiality is guaranteed. I realize I have the right to refuse to participate and that my right to withdraw from participation at any time during the study will be respected with no coercion or prejudice.

Note: Questions or concerns about participation in this research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the Researcher: Eric J. Erickson, (715) 232-1766; secondly to the Research Advisor: Dr. Edwin Biggerstaff, (715) 232-2410; or lastly to the Chair: UW-Stout institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 Harvey Hall, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI, 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

Please check one of the following choices:

I am interested in being contacted for a follow-up telephone interview regarding stressors of an elementary school counselor. I prefer to be called at (circle one) WORK or HOME  
The best time to reach me is between \_\_\_ to \_\_\_ A.M. or P.M. at telephone number ( ) \_\_\_\_\_.

I am NOT interested in being contacted for a follow up telephone interview.

Sincerely,

Eric J. Erickson  
Graduate Student, Counseling and Psychological Service