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The Silent Struggle: Death Anxiety among Social Workers during the Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to frontline workers, particularly social workers, who play a pivotal role in providing support to vulnerable populations. Amidst the chaos and uncertainties, social workers have silently confronted a profound emotional struggle known as death anxiety. This universal human experience is magnified by the pandemic's devastating impact, as they witness the loss and suffering of individuals and communities on a daily basis. This article delves into the silent struggle of death anxiety among social workers during the pandemic, exploring the impact on their mental health, coping strategies, and the need for support. By shedding light on this often overlooked aspect of their profession, this article aims to promote awareness and foster a supportive environment that prioritizes the well-being of these frontline heroes, ensuring they can continue their crucial work with resilience and compassion.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to societies worldwide, with frontline workers, including social workers, facing an arduous battle against the virus. Social workers play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable populations, but their tireless efforts have not come without a cost. Amidst the pandemic's chaos, social workers have silently grappled with death anxiety, a profound

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emotional struggle stemming from their frontline experiences. This article sheds light on the silent battle that social workers endure while navigating the pandemic's uncertain terrain.

The pandemic has put public social services under intense stress and has generated a great inequality and social gap that social work tries to minimize. Different publications have echoed this situation, stating as the main factor the impact of the cessation of economic activity, which has led to a minimization of family income and aggravated inequality if different social groups are compared, affecting education, housing, food, or health. That is why it would be a challenge for society to ensure social coverage to minimize this high social gap, being social workers the professionals in charge of providing and/or managing social benefits and interventions that result in the welfare improvement.

For all these reasons, it is essential to analyze death anxiety in essential professionals in the current social and health care field due to the implications it can have at the individual, social and occupational levels. High levels of death anxiety can cause mental health problems, including permanent anxiety and depression, among other pathologies, favoring these professionals' greater vulnerability to extreme situations, such as those experienced during the exercise of their work.

Researchers' situation generated by the pandemic has led to great interest in knowing the mental state of many workers considered essential during this stage. The chances of developing disorders, such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety, or depression, are very high in this type of overwhelming situation. With health workers and security forces, because of their high exposure to the virus and the problem of heightened physical and emotional stress, high levels of death anxiety were found.

Social workers have also been living in an alarming situation that may develop emotional distress without adequate psychological resources and anxiety. They have been in contact with the reality of many individuals and families who in the last year have seen not only their health but also their income endangered, thus generating a greater need for fundamental issues. For this reason, the present research is pertinent to know how the pandemic has affected this group of workers in the field of death anxiety.

The origin of the emotion that gives rise to fear and, consequently, death anxiety is diffuse and can be established in different causes. Thus, it is more complicated to set a concrete form of manifestation. Collett and Lester developed a Fear of Death scale, marking the multiple causes that can cause it. Different publications emphasized that the manifest reactions will depend on anxiety as a state or a trait. Collett and Lester distinguished four components: fear of one's death, fear of the death of others, fear of one's dying process, and fear of the dying process of others.

The role of social workers during the pandemic



Social workers have always been instrumental in providing essential support to those in need. During the COVID-19 pandemic, their role became even more vital as they faced challenges of an unprecedented scale. They were tasked with providing emotional support to individuals who lost loved ones, navigating complex grief scenarios, and addressing the psychological impact of isolation and fear on society. With limited resources and immense pressure, social workers had to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, placing their own emotional well-being at risk.

Death anxiety: the unseen struggle

Death anxiety, also known as thanatophobia, is a universal human experience that becomes amplified during times of crisis and upheaval. For social workers on the frontline, witnessing the devastating effects of the pandemic on individuals and communities magnifies this anxiety. The fear of contracting the virus, the emotional burden of witnessing loss and suffering, and the pressure to provide compassionate care can take a toll on their mental health.

The silent struggle

Despite their commitment to serving others, many social workers keep their own struggles hidden beneath a veneer of strength and resilience. They might feel compelled to prioritize their clients' needs above their own emotional well-being, leading to the suppression of their fears and anxieties. This silence can be detrimental, as it prevents them from seeking the support they require to cope with the overwhelming emotions they experience daily.

Impact on mental health

The prolonged exposure to death and loss during the pandemic has contributed to increased stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion among social workers. The fear of infecting their families and loved ones and the constant pressure to be a source of strength for others can lead to compassion fatigue, emotional numbing, and feelings of helplessness.

Moreover, the pandemic has forced many social workers to confront their own mortality, which further intensifies death anxiety. Faced with the reality of death daily, they may struggle to find meaning in their work and experience a profound existential crisis.

Coping strategies and support

Recognizing the silent struggle of death anxiety among social workers is crucial to supporting their well-being. Organizations and supervisors must create a supportive environment where mental health is



prioritized, stigma around seeking help is reduced, and resources for coping with stress and trauma are readily available.

Peer support and debriefing sessions can provide social workers with a safe space to share their experiences and emotions. These sessions can help normalize their feelings and foster a sense of camaraderie among colleagues.

Encouraging self-care practices is equally important. Social workers must be reminded to prioritize their physical and emotional well-being, seeking time for rest, relaxation, and activities that bring joy.

Conclusion

The silent struggle of death anxiety among social workers during the pandemic is a pressing issue that demands attention and support. Acknowledging the emotional toll of their work and providing resources to cope with stress and grief is essential in ensuring their well-being and continued dedication to helping others. By supporting those who support others, we can foster a resilient and compassionate society even in the face of the most challenging times.

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