

The BACP review of research into workplace counselling: implications for research policy and practice

John McLeod has an update

BACP has recently published the second edition of its review of research into workplace counselling: *Counselling in the workplace: a comprehensive review of the research evidence*¹. The first edition, which came out in 2001, included summaries of 80 research studies into all aspects of employee counselling, and reported that counselling is well received by those who use it, and that the provision of counselling can have a significant impact on mental health problems at work, and contribute to a reduction in sickness absence rates. What has changed? The new edition encompasses 128 studies, uses a more rigorous approach to evaluating the methodological adequacy of evaluation studies, uses a new model of workplace counselling to structure the available evidence, includes a review of previous reviews, and provides more detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the instruments that can be applied to assess outcome and process factors in workplace counselling. However, the overall findings and recommendations of the 2007 review are broadly similar to those presented in 2001. One of the distinctive new findings, largely derived from research carried out by Csiernik², is that placing a limit on the number of counselling sessions available to service users makes no difference to the cost of operating a service – services that operated without a limit to the number of times a client could meet with his or her counsellor, reported the same average number of sessions per client as those that restricted therapy to a maximum number of meetings.

One of the most interesting and significant aspects of the new review lies in its capacity to highlight emerging trends in theory and practice. On the whole, previous research into workplace counselling has tended to look at the effects of therapy with mixed groups of clients (ie whoever turns up for help). While this kind of research is necessary in order to assess the effectiveness of counselling in routine, everyday practice, it is not particularly



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helpful in terms of addressing more fine-grained questions relating to 'what works for whom?' There have been some recent studies, by contrast, that have examined the impact of counselling interventions designed specifically for sub-groups of stressed employees. Gersons et al³ carried out a randomised clinical trial of brief eclectic psychotherapy for police officers with post-traumatic stress disorder. This is a well-designed study that illustrates the potential for building therapeutic packages around the distinctive needs of this group of clients, and which reports exceptionally high success rates. Salmela-Aro et al⁴ and Van Dierendonck et al⁵ describe innovative therapy approaches for clients experiencing burnout. These studies report less impressive success rates than Gersons et al³, but their analysis of the issues faced in work with employees who are experiencing burnout provides a firm basis for further research in this area.

Another welcome addition to the evidence base for workplace counselling concerns a cluster of new studies into counselling at a distance. Although many EAPs and other workplace counselling services offer telephone counselling, and increasingly email counselling, until now the research base for these modalities has been meagre. The current review includes analysis of two studies of email counselling in the workplace^{6,7}, and one study of telephone counselling⁸. These studies offer evidence regarding the effectiveness of counselling at a distance and

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client perceptions of these services, and introduce methods for investigating these forms of counselling that could readily be utilised by other researchers in the future.

Among the studies that stand out in the review, there are important contributions from Arthur⁹, who documents the alarmingly high levels of mental health problems found in users of a UK employee assistance programme, and Shakespeare-Finch and Scully¹⁰, who demonstrate how a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can be used to develop a comprehensive evaluation of a counselling service. A landmark piece of work by Csiernik¹¹ closely examines the reporting practices of EAP and in-house counselling providers, in respect of utilisation rates. Csiernik found that a confusing array of different formulae were applied by organisations when calculating utilisation rates.

Despite these very valuable additions to the research literature in workplace counselling, the main lesson of the review is that research in this area of counselling practice is fragmented, and not capable of yielding answers to practical questions that are of interest to practitioners, service managers, and policy makers. Not enough studies are being published – only about 10 each year. Many of these studies are of low quality and few of them focus on the effectiveness of counselling. No new cost-benefit studies have been published since the 2001 review. There is a lack of good quality quantitative randomised trials (RCTs), and also a lack of qualitative studies that allow the voice of the client to be heard. There is a lack of consensus over measures, which means that it is hard to compare findings across studies. Although there are undoubtedly many studies in progress in the UK that are using the CORE outcome questionnaire, the review was not able to identify any published articles based on this work. Behind these factors, there appears to be an absence of institutional support for research in workplace counselling. There exists no centre of national or international research excellence to provide leadership for investigators in this field, and only very limited investment in research from commercial providers and government departments.

In conclusion, therefore, the new BACP review of research into workplace counselling presents a comprehensive overview of studies in this domain of practice, in an accessible manner, and will hopefully be of value to everyone involved in this sector, in terms of making decisions that are research informed. At the same time, my hope is that the review will serve as a wake-up call to BACP, the Association for Counselling at Work and related organisations, to come together to develop a more coordinated research strategy. Workplace counselling is a highly

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significant sector of the profession – it urgently needs a more solid research base if it is to continue to be effective in meeting the needs of clients. A shopping list for a coordinated research strategy might embrace a range of activities: promotion of research training and awareness; support for practitioners to undertake Master's and doctoral research; pooling resources to carry out large-scale collaborative studies; pooling international knowledge and experience through research conferences, edited books and special issues of journals. If this is to happen, it will require providers of counselling to invest in research and development, and purchasers of counselling (both organisations and individuals) to demand to see the evidence. ■

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