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Holistic Wellness of Counselors and Health Care Professionals through Mindfulness Self-Care Techniques and Conscious Living

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Abstract:

Holistic wellbeing of health care professionals and counselors is crucial to avoid burnout, work fatigue, and related impairment. The current paper focuses on articulating the definitions of key terms like holistic wellness, self-care through mindfulness techniques and conscious living. With the help of a conceptual diagram, the author also discusses research findings and common themes emerged from the systematic review of literature from 2003-2024 in this context. The author further explores eight areas (occupational, social, environmental or relational, financial, physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual) of holistic wellness with examples of self-care activities. In addition, the author illustrates the vital role of conscious living and mindfulness techniques for the optimal holistic wellness of counselors and health care professionals. Finally, the implications for counselors and health care professionals are presented along with future recommendations.

Keywords: Holistic Wellness, Conscious Living, Counselor Burnout, Self-Care Techniques, Mindfulness, Mental Health, Meditation, Areas of Wellness

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Wellness through self-care is fundamental for the counseling profession and allied health care fields. While self-care through mindful and conscious living is important for anyone in general, it is essential for counselors and healthcare professionals for their optimal functioning. However, self-care through mindfulness practices often is challenging and one needs to be patient until it becomes habitual (McCurdy et al., 2024). Mindful and conscious living brings a paradigm shift through positive thinking and develops one's own resiliency to deal with life's challenges and difficulties (Cook-Cottone, 2015). Mindfulness grants one to fully experience the current moment by being aware of what is happening and by engaging in the observation

of that thought (Puig, 2012). According to Hassan (2024), our minds are always busy- “thinks all through the day, dreams in the night and mindfulness is a way to give a break to the chatter or noise of thoughts” (p. 9). Being present in the moment is nothing but conscious living. McCabe-Maucher (2019) reports that it is essential for health care professionals to practice conscious living through thinking deeper, by nourishing the private-talk and by designing a customized self-care plan that nurtures ones own body, mind and spirit.

As healthcare professionals and therapists deal with human emotions of clients from a wide variety of mental health and psychiatric issues daily, they are more susceptible to compassion fatigue, countertransference, vicarious trauma etc. (Trippany et.al, 2004) and need regular self-care geared towards their holistic wellness (Cook-Cottone, 2015, Blount et al., 2016; McCurdy et al., 2024). Failure to take care of themselves adequately may result in work fatigue, burn out, and in extreme cases impairment because the health care field especially mental health counseling is a demanding field. (Cashwell, 2007; Lee et al., 2020; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014). Moreover, counselors and health care professionals are bound by ethical codes of respective fields formulated by American Counseling Association (ACA, 2024), American Psychological Association (APA, 2024), National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2024) etc. for their optimal functioning and wellness. For example, ACA 2024, Standard C.2.g requires counselors to continuously self-screen themselves ‘for the signs of impairment from their own physical, mental or emotional problems’, and to ‘refrain from offering or providing professional services when such impairment is likely to harm a client or others’ (ACA 2024, Standard F.5.b).

Further, the need for holistic wellness of counselors has increased significantly in recent years as research findings suggest that there is a multifold increase in the mental health issues worldwide due to the impact of Coronavirus (COVID) disease (Coley & Baum, 2021). For example, World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) reported 25% increase in anxiety and depression throughout the globe due to the COVID-19 pandemic while there is already tremendous shortage of healthcare professionals and workers especially in low-income countries. As a result, health care professionals are faced with gigantic caseloads, with complex issues in highly stressful environments resulting in increased chances of burnout. On top of it, counselors are not usually inclined to take care of themselves adequately (Lee et al., 2010). In Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030, WHO calls for counselors’ and health care workers’ burnout preventive measures like strengthening the resources, increasing the collaborations at the macro level and by appropriate self-care measures at the micro level (WHO, 2022). Despite these crucial needs, counselors and health care professionals often lag in making self-care through mindfulness and conscious living a priority for them. Research suggests that this may be due to the lack of awareness and resources to educate counselors on the vital importance of holistic wellness, the role of self-care techniques for healthy and conscious living (Cook-Cottone, 2015; Brown et al., 2015; McCabe-Maucher, 2019; WHO, 2022; Hassen, 2024). Based on these needs, the purpose of the present study is to conduct an extensive systematic review of two decades of literature in this context. More specifically the current study aims at exploring the following research questions.

1. What themes emerge from the systematic review of literature pertaining to the holistic wellness of counselors and health care professions with an emphasis on self-care through mindfulness and conscious living?
2. What are the different types of wellness models and associated domains if any?
3. How mindfulness self-care practices and conscious living impact the holistic wellness of counselors and healthcare professionals?

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual paper utilized a qualitative systematic literature review approach. According to Green et al. (2006), qualitative systematic review consists of rigorous and explicit methods aimed at exploring a focused research topic or question, i.e., Holistic Wellness of Counselors and Health Care Professionals through Mindfulness and Conscious Living. Khan et al. (2003) formulated 5 essential steps of conducting a systematic review as listed below and the author followed each of the steps meticulously.

Step 1: Framing questions for review: The questions should be clear, unambiguous and structured

Step 2: Identifying relevant work: The studies should be based on extensive search from multiple sources

Step 3: Assessing quality of studies

Step 4: Summarizing the evidence

Step 5: Interpreting the results

For step 1 from the above, the author aimed at exploring the three research questions listed in the earlier section regarding the holistic wellness, self-care practices of counselors and health care professionals.

For step 2 or for data collection, an initial data search was conducted in author's University library web page by using the key word search of 'Wellness for Counselors and Health Care Professionals'. Search from multiple data sources like Psych Articles, EBSCO host, ERIC, PsycInfo etc. yielded extensive data of 6302 studies. Then, by using multiple filters, only studies with key words like 'Holistic Wellbeing', 'Counselor burnout', 'Self Care for Clinicians', 'Mindfulness', and 'Conscious Living' from 2003-2024 are included, and the rest of the studies were excluded. This process reduced the data set to 2009. A thorough and careful screening was conducted to exclude the studies that are duplicates or appeared irrelevant to the present topic. Out of the 93 records identified, the author purposively selected a total of 30 studies (majority of which are peer reviewed journals, information from some websites, a few textbooks etc.) for the current review.

For steps 3-5, the finalized literature was thoroughly reviewed and analyzed to identify the common themes that will be presented in the next section. As per Cresswell (2014), credibility

and transferability are vital for a qualitative researcher. To ensure these measures are taken care of properly and to avoid researcher bias, the author maintained a reflective journal all through the process in addition to triangulating the data by cross checking with a colleague on the themes emerged.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the extensive review of literature dated from 2003 to 2024, the author identified the following five themes as illustrated in figure 1 below.

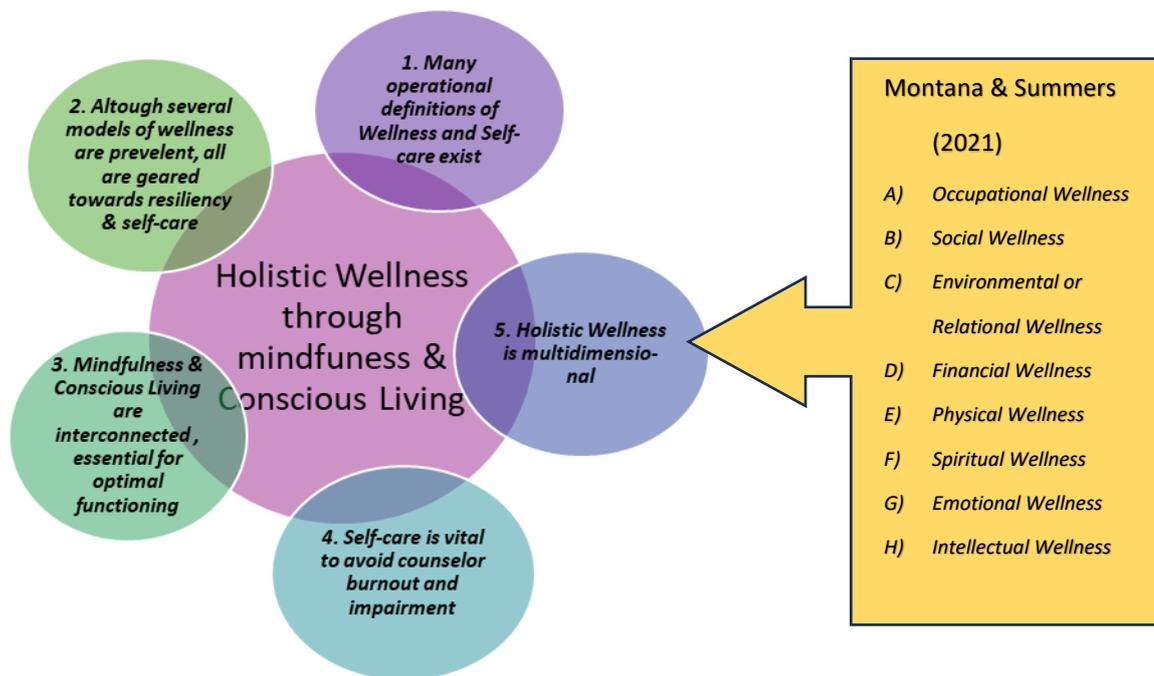


Figure 1. Conceptual depiction of five themes emerged from the literature review on Counselor Wellness

1. Many operational definitions of Wellness and Self-Care exist.

The research on the basic concepts of Wellness and Self-Care dates back from several decades. Few of those definitions from the literature reviewed are discussed below.

- According to The Global Wellness Institute (n.d.), wellness is defined as “the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health”. It is multidimensional and often consists of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and environmental domains. The goal of holistic health is to bring harmony or balance among these dimensions, so the individual achieves a state of optimal functioning.

- Myers, Sweeny and Witmer (2000) defines Wellness as “a way of life oriented toward optimal health and wellbeing, in which body, mind and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully within the human and natural community” (p. 252). They designed the popular wheel of wellness for counselors that consists of 16 characteristics of healthy people and encourage counselors to collaborate in developing wellness goals.
- The National Wellness Institute (n.d.) summarizes wellness as a conscious, self-directed, evolving process encompassing multiple dimensions geared towards multicultural and holistic lifestyle for optimal functioning. The six dimensions (Intellectual, Occupational, Spiritual, Social, Emotional and Physical) of Wellness model that they present are interconnected and assist educators/ healthcare professionals to bring awareness for one’s own conscious living and healthy lifestyles.
- In his review article, Friedman (2017) reports that counselor self-care consists of the holistic practices aimed towards attaining and maintaining physical, mental, spiritual well-being. These practices are not only aimed at practicing self-compassion but also gives equal importance to the self-awareness of one’s overall well-being.
- According to McCabe-Maucher (2019), self-care is a phenomenon of knowing oneself intimately. It is a dynamic process that changes constantly based on one’s past experiences and deep introspection.

2. *There are several models of wellness, but almost all are geared towards resiliency and self-care.*

Blount et al. (2016) discussed seven types of Wellness models with main tenets and intended populations to whom those models may be helpful. These include

- i. Hettler’s Hexagonal Model of Wellness
- ii. Lifespan Development Model by Sweeney and Witmer
- iii. Wheel of Wellness by Witmer, Sweeney and Myers
- iv. Zimpher’s Wellness Model
- v. Model of Spiritual Wellness by Chandler, Miner Holden and Kolander
- vi. Perceived Wellness Model by Adam, Benzer and Steinhardt
- vii. Clinical and Educational Model of Wellness by Granello.

Although there are slight differences in the basic philosophy and main tenets of each of these, the primary goal of these models is to enhance individuals' sense of wellbeing through a variety of self-care modalities and techniques. In addition, these models also aim at assessing or identifying the challenges or obstacles to counselor wellness and ways of building resiliency. Cook-Cotton (2015) adds that bringing harmony or attunement

between the different internal aspects of self (like physiological, emotional, cognitive) and the external aspects (like ecological context of micro, exo and macro systems) requires resiliency and adaptation through different self-care strategies like yoga and meditation.

3. Self-care is vital to avoid counselor burnout and impairment.

A phenomenological study conducted by Blount et al., in 2016, explored the clinical supervisors' perceptions of their supervisee wellness. They identified 5 themes that are vital for supervisee wellness. They are intentionality, self-care, humanness, support and wellness identity. Blount et al., concluded that regular self-care is a must for counselors and health care professionals due to their nature of job like 'frequent encounters with difficult and challenging client life occurrences' (p.360). According to Cook-Cottone (2015), one's own balance of external and internal selves in these domains through formal and informal mindfulness practices is key for self-regulation. McCabe-Maucher (2019) adds that a key self-care strategy that counselors should practice is creating healthy boundaries and failure to maintaining them will often result in burnout and fatigue.

4. Mindfulness and Conscious Living are interconnected and are essential for optimal functioning of clinicians.

Mindfulness as described by Khabat-Zinn (2005) involves paying attention to the here and now without any preconceived notions or judgements. In his book on mindfulness, Hassan (2024) states, "It's not easy to think straight when your mind is overwhelmed and confused; it is hard to see through the mental clutter. Mindfulness allows you to make clear decisions more easily..." (p. 10). He adds that being mindful makes one's thinking more flexible and without judgements or getting caught up in past behaviors or experiences or future expectations. Through conscious living, counselors can be cognizant of the common mind traps that they experience in today's life and try to break those thought patterns for a calmer and more grounded approach to handle them. While discussing about the evaluation of mindful science, Brown et al., (2015) reported that researchers over the years (dated from 1890 to the early 20th century) focused on one or more aspects of consciousness like outcomes and behaviors of cognitions and emotions. However, there was a huge surge of interest in mindfulness-based interventions from the early 2000's. According to Brown et al., (2015) in today's world mindfulness predominantly refers to consciousness itself. Cook-Cottone (2015) reports that mindfulness practices of noticing and allowing insight to explore one's own phenomena of experiences results in raising the consciousness and ultimately paves a way for an empowered self.

McCurdy et al., (2024) studied the program evaluation of mental health and wellness curriculum in 460 school children and found a relative improvement in their emotional regulation. They reported that the growing trend of interest to engage in mindfulness-based

interventions like yoga and meditation for students, counselors and educators is promising. They encouraged policy makers to foster incorporation of mindfulness practices into the curriculum as training the staff to identify the challenges in implementation may reduce stress and yield positive academic outcomes.

5. *Holistic Wellness is multidimensional.*

Over the years, wellness models have been changed, advanced to add more domains and prongs or life tasks or dimensions. Hettler's Wellness wheel is a visual self-exploration tool with six dimensions initially but now includes a seventh dimension. Many models are widely prevalent today concluding that holistic wellness is an integral part of conscious mind, body and spirit with several dimensions as discussed in earlier sessions. However, the author focusses on the illustration of the 8 dimensions described by Montana and Summers (2021) along with examples of self-care strategies or the common mindfulness practices for each.

According to Montana and Summers (2021), there are 8 dimensions of holistic wellness that impact the work fatigue and burnout levels of counselors. They are A) occupational, B) social, C) environmental or relational, D) financial, E) physical, F) spiritual, G) emotional, and H) intellectual.

A) *Occupational Wellness*

Occupational Wellness pertains to the sense of self-efficacy that one experiences to perform job duties and roles (Montana & Summers, 2021). Work life balance is an important factor that is attributed to the positive mindset and feeling productive at work (Mihelič & Aleksić, 2017). Other factors of positive occupational wellness include career growth, promotions and incentives received at work; sense of gratification associated with the professional responsibilities at work including volunteer work etc. while work overloads, stressful and toxic settings negatively influence occupational wellness (The National Wellness Institute (n.d.); Montana & Summers, 2021; Vidic, 2021). Being cognizant of one's own work fatigue, setting up healthy boundaries at work, accepting the truth of not being able to serve all, and observing one's own clinical areas of expertise are some of the mindfulness practices that will help with developing/maintaining occupational wellness.

B) *Social Wellness*

Human beings cannot live in isolation. However, relationships can be overwhelming sometimes. Since majority of mental health client issues surround on the complexities of emotions from different relationships, counselors and health care professionals often may bring them home or experience counter transference. (McCabe-Maucher, 2019; McCurdy et al., 2024). Many researchers in this context concluded that it is very important to have a good support system to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging,

and to develop interdependence to identify and resolve challenges or stressful events in life (Barden et al., 2015; Puig et al., 2012; Montana & Summers, 2021; Vidic, 2021). With the technological advances, perspective on Social Wellness has changed over years. People are spending more time behind the screens, getting connected in virtual world which has its own disadvantages. In this context, McCabe-Maucher (2019) emphasizes the importance of external boundaries like limiting the screen time to specific hours of the day, clearly communicating with clients, friends and family members about one's virtual accessibility etc. He further discussed the importance of physical boundaries, external or social media boundaries, internal boundaries like intentional self-disclosing, time/ temporary boundaries and its impact on social wellness.

C) *Environmental or Relational Wellness*

Robino (2019) reports that Global Compassion Fatigue – a term used to describe the process of how health care professionals are affected by global events like wars, socio-political climates, or issues of troubling world. McCurdy et al., (2024) describes the detrimental impact of COVID on the psychological wellbeing of clients, counselors on their environmental and relational wellness. In their paper on Eco Wellness: The Missing Factor in Holistic Wellness Models, Reese and Myers (2012) report the positive influences of natural environments on the physical and mental health of counselors. Access to nature, environmental identity, and transcendence are the three important components that help with relational wellness. They further quote an example of how viewing nature decreases the self-reported minor illness and headaches in a study and how it improved student test scores and academic performance (as cited on p. 401). Mindful walking, hiking, walking meditation, gardening etc. are some of the self-care strategies that counselors may have to build into their wellness plan.

D) *Financial Wellness*

Financial wellness is one of the key dimensions of holistic wellness. Montana and Summers (2021) define financial wellness as “the ability make informed financial decisions. It includes ability to live comfortably, invest in savings, save for retirement, and prepare for unexpected emergencies” (p.91). Global Wellness Institute (n.d) and Vidic (2021) reported that this dimension is one of the most affected one for many individuals around the globe due to the COVID pandemic. Research suggests that credibility of counselors and health care professionals plays a big role on their financial wellness. For example, Hassen (2024) reports that the more certifications and credentials that a health care provider have, the higher the earnings. He adds that private practice clinicians need to design customized financial goals like setting up emergency fund, contracting with insurance panels, estimating the ways to meet annual revenue goals etc. for a thriving practice.

E) *Physical Wellness*

Research suggests that physical activities like exercise, walking, jogging etc. are positively correlated with the other domains of holistic wellness like psychological well-being, cognitive functioning, life satisfaction, decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression. Through multiple logistic regression, Goodwin (2003) analyzed national comorbid survey data of 8098 adults between 15-54 years of age in the United States. Results indicated a significant negative association between regular physical activity and anxiety, social phobia, specific phobia, agoraphobia, and depressive symptoms. In addition, counselors aim to build resilience through mental wellness by thinking, connecting, feeling and functioning. In this context, the Global Wellness Institute (n.d) illustrates internal and external mental wellness pathways through the below figure. According to it, there are four pathways through which internal (mental) aspects are connected to external (physical) aspects of one's psychological wellbeing or conscious living.



Figure 2. Adapted from The Global Wellness Institute's (n.d.) website
<https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/mental-wellness/>

They are (1) Activity and Creativity, (2) Growth and Nourishment, (3) Rest and Rejuvenation, (4) Connection and Meaning. All of these pathways are interconnected and extremely important for one's conscious living. Some of the self-care strategies that contribute to physical wellness include (but not limited to), walking, running, jogging, yoga of any form, dance, gardening, cooking, cleaning etc.

F) *Spiritual Wellness*

Spirituality is one of the coping skills that impact resiliency of not only the clients but also the counselors (McCabe-Maucher, 2019). Cashwell et al., (2007) operationally define spirituality as an active and passive developmental process through which one's

‘beliefs, disciplined practices, and experiences are grounded and integrated to result in increased mindfulness, heartfulness, and soulfulness’ (p. 67). According to them, spiritual wellness is a conscious altering process, and a hallmark of this path is mindfulness. They further describe that mindfulness practices can be either formal self-care techniques like different types of meditations while informal modalities entail conscious decisions to be nonjudgmentally aware of like mindful eating, mindful walking, mindful bathing etc. Reese and Myers (2012) reported that nature aids in self-transcendence and is positively associated with community connectedness thus contributing to spiritual wellness. According to Cook-Cottone (2015), attaining harmony or balance through the 12 embodied practices is the ultimate spiritual goal for mental health professionals. These practices like living in inquiry, being mindfully aware of, cultivating nonattachment, prioritizing self-care etc. will help us to manage the challenges of internal and external selves. Mindfulness meditation techniques such as body scans, progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, mantra mediation, chakra meditation, yoga etc. have several benefits to bring the balance or harmony through relaxation. Below chart outlines some of such benefits based on the literature review.

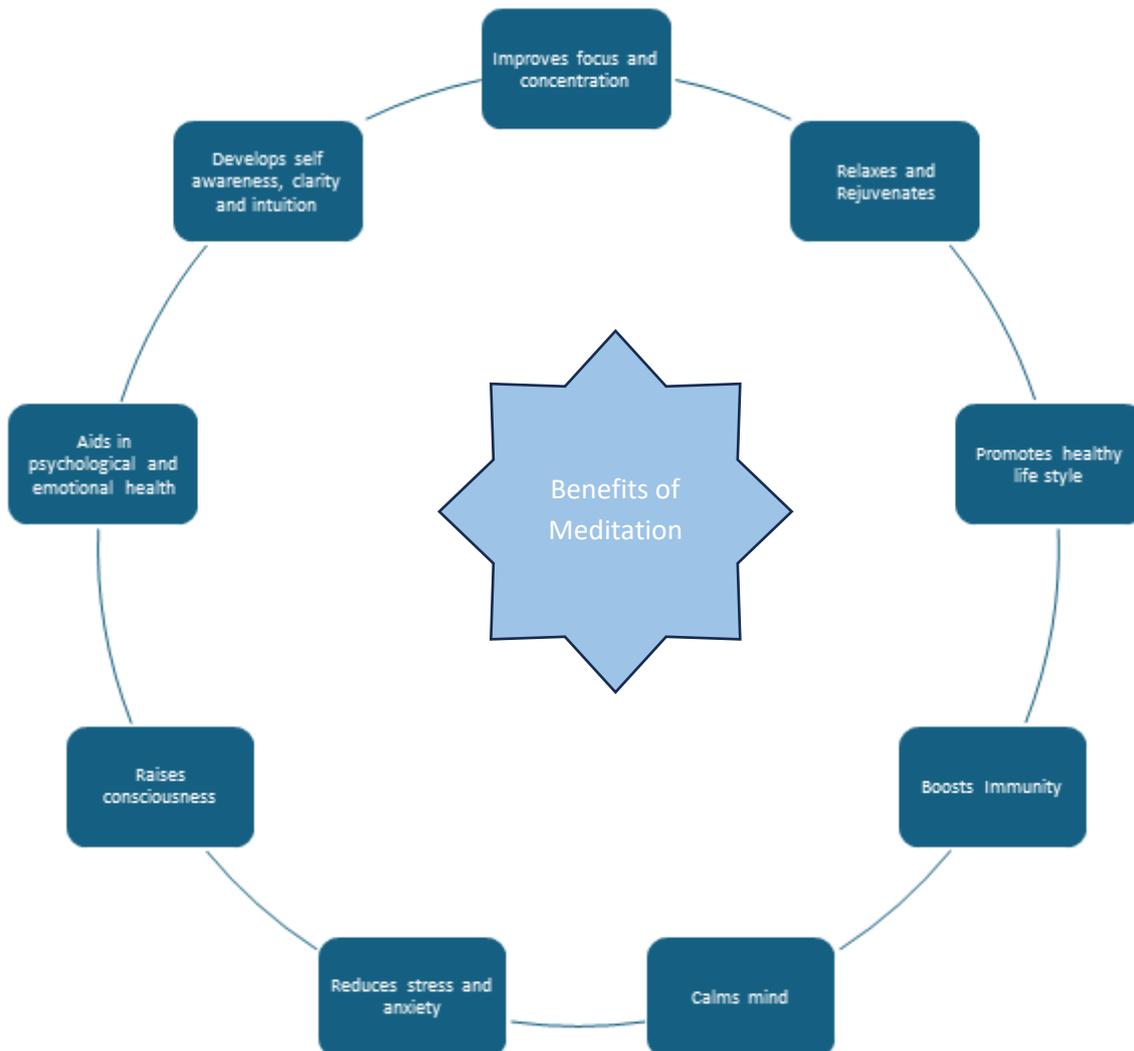


Figure 3. Benefits of meditation chart

G) Emotional Wellness

According to Montana and Summers (2021), emotional wellness pertains to management of one's own emotions by being aware of them and accepting them. Since healthcare professionals deal with a range of extreme emotions of clients including different types of trauma, it is vital for them to unwind or process their own emotions on a daily basis. Puig et al. (2012) examined the relationship between job burn out and personal wellness of mental health professionals. They concluded that vicarious trauma and counter transference are two of the many factors that are associated with counselor burnout thus contributing towards negative emotional wellbeing of counselors. Lee et al. (2010) and Compassion fatigue (n.d.) urged the counselors about the vital need to mindfully observe and monitor one's own emotions. Yoga, different types of meditations, listening to music, seeing their own therapy etc. are some of the self-care techniques that counselors can adapt into their emotional wellness routine.

H) Intellectual Wellness

Intellectual wellness is attributed to one's own ability and motivation for new/continuous learning either based on real life experiences or by designing and applying new knowledge through discovery and innovation (Montana & Summers,2021; Vidic, 2021). It involves active brain processing, organizational, and meta-cognitive skills to process and retain information through assimilation (Hassen, 2024). As the field of counseling is dynamic, therapists and health care professionals need to keep up with the research and best practices in the field by continuing education. Moreover, ACA code of ethics requires a set number of continuing education credits for license and certification renewals. Attending workshops, conferences, reading about research and the innovations in the field, multicultural immersion experiences, travels, participating in retreats, study abroad programs etc. are some of the self-care strategies that promotes intellectual wellness.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORK AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

This conceptual paper provides insight into the evolution of the concept of wellness over two decades. It highlights the vital importance of self-care for counselors and health care professionals. The paper discusses several wellness models and how they are connected to holistic health. Thorough discussion of common themes emerged from this extensive systemic review adds to the existing body of literature. The paper yields several counseling implications. For example, knowledge gained through this conceptual paper can aid in increasing counselor awareness and in educating the health care professionals about the importance of self-care through mindfulness practices and conscious living. The multidimensional nature of holistic wellness focusses on several self-care strategies that counselors need to build into their short-term and long-term wellness plans.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

From common themes generated from this extensive review discussed above, it is evident that counselor wellness through self-care is crucial due to the demanding nature of the profession. To avoid burnout and impairment of health care professionals, counselors should design their own wellness plan targeted towards all 8 dimensions of holistic wellness and thrive for their optimal functioning and wellbeing through conscious living.

In future, the current study may be replicated to examine the common themes of holistic wellbeing and self-care practices of culturally diverse populations. As the current study is limited to reviewing information from only two decades, future conceptual papers may extend the review to several decades, from more sources of information, and with a greater number of studies. Systematic review quantitative reviews like meta-analysis and content analysis on this topic might add to the field of counselor wellness. Qualitative exploratory studies like counselor perceptions on wellness models, wellness assessment studies and or phenomenological inquiries or case studies on holistic wellness of clinicians from different health care fields would be helpful. Quantitative studies or mixed methods on different dimensions of holistic wellness would add to the field of counseling.

Brief Profile of the Author:

Suneetha B Manyam, PhD, LPC, CPCS, CRC, BC-TMH is a tenured professor at Mercer University in the Department of Counseling, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. As a counselor educator for 16+ years, she has been training and supervising the future counselors in the masters and PhD programs in Clinical Mental Health, Clinical Rehabilitation, School Counseling, Counselor Education and Supervision programs. Dr. Manyam actively engages in scholarly research in the areas of counselor wellness, mindfulness meditation and self-care techniques, relationship issues, microaggressions, and multicultural advocacy. Further, she has several scientific paper publications in the above areas of expertise. Dr. Manyam has also presented at several local, national, and international conferences and workshops including as a keynote speaker. As a licensed clinician, Dr. Manyam is serving couples, families and clients from 5-75 years in the areas of anxiety, stress management, trauma, grief, acculturation issues for the last two decades.

Statements and Declaration: I declare that I have no conflict of interest with my places of employment or anybody else in publishing this article. No financial support was received for the work within this article.

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