

What Is The Impact Of Job Burnout On Nursing Home Administrators?

Felicia L. Wilson, Saint Leo University, USA

ABSTRACT

The nursing home industry is facing a crisis that appears to only get worse as each year progresses. The issue at hand is attracting and retaining qualified nursing home administrators to run efficient nursing homes. There is an overwhelming amount of data that highlights the devastating effects of job burnout on professionals. Job burnout has been found to impact the longevity of professionals. The purpose of this research was to examine the impact of job burnout among Georgia's nursing home administrators. Participants in the study were licensed nursing home administrators (N = 363) who are employed in the state of Georgia. I received 141 completed surveys for a response rate of 38%. This study found that nursing home administrators show moderate levels emotional exhaustion, low cynicism, and high professional efficacy.

Keywords: Job Burnout; Emotional Exhaustion; Low Cynicism; Professional Efficacy; Nursing Home Administrators

INTRODUCTION

According to Zalaquett and Stens (2006), the U.S. adult population is growing older. As such, the adult population is expected to reach 20% of the total population by the year 2030. This population increase could significantly impact the nursing home industry. With an increasing elderly population, nursing homes will have to address issues such as dwindling financial resources and staffing. These increasing responsibilities will continue to add to the stress level of nursing home administrators (NHA). Tellis-Nayak (2007) describes nursing home administrators as “the pillars of long-term care” (p. 20). If these leaders are stressed out and dissatisfied with their jobs, they are more likely to manifest symptoms of job burnout and leave the industry. Castle, Ferguson, and Hughes (2009) reported that nursing home administrators are responsible for the oversight of care practices and initiating quality assurance projects. Long-term care administrators can become dissatisfied with their jobs secondary to high workload. If their workload is continually increasing and they are not receiving additional staff to accommodate the workload, the administrator can become disengaged.

The fact that licensed nursing home administrators are leaving the nursing home industry despite still having a passion for the job is concerning. Tellis-Nayak (2007) reported that administrators feel a strong desire to work in the nursing home industry. This strong desire could be linked to altruism. Stoil (2002) conducted a survey and discovered that job burnout is the underlying issue surrounding nursing home administrators' exodus from the nursing home industry. Stoil found that most participants still enjoyed some aspects of being a nursing home administrator at the time of their departure. Although this issue has been discussed in the nursing home industry for several years, the general research community has not invested the time or expressed interest in the subject.

Most experts agree that as nursing home administrators retire and fewer people apply for administrator licenses, the nursing home industry will eventually be left in a dire situation. Administrators are leaving the industry for two reasons: retirement and job burnout. Castle et al. (2009) reported that the nursing home industry serves on average 3.5 million people each year. The industry provides short-term rehabilitative care and long-term care (Castle et al., 2009). McCarthy (2005) reported that, although intrinsic satisfaction is essential to retaining administrators, the human factor of being continually overwhelmed is a key contributing factor to the decline of qualified administrators.

Body

There are several issues that remain unaddressed regarding nursing home administrators. In the 1970s, the federal government required, via legislation, that skilled nursing facilities hire only licensed professionals in the role of nursing home administrator (Stoil, 2002). Since the early 1970s, there has also been a continuing trend of administrators leaving the industry. A reduction of qualified administrators leaves one of the most vulnerable populations at risk. The elderly population depends on qualified personnel to oversee their care. The nursing home administrator (NHA) is the executive director of the organization. The director is the person responsible for managing the nursing home and ensuring that resident needs are met. Stoil reported that “no one has collected information on the career pattern of NHAs and on the factors that cause those careers to be extended or aborted” (p. 6). This issue is deserving of research to ensure that nursing homes provide efficient and effective quality of care for residents. This research study is a first step in providing concrete data on nursing home administrators and the reasons why they choose to leave or stay in the industry. Therefore, I sought to answer the following question: Do nursing home administrator’s experience job burnout?

To assess job burnout among nursing home administrators in Georgia, each respondent was asked to complete the Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Survey (MBI–GS). The 16-item Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Survey (MBI–GS) has three subscales: exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy. Together the subscales of the MBI–GS provide a three-dimensional perspective on job burnout. A high degree of burnout is reflected in high scores on exhaustion and cynicism and low scores on professional efficacy. It is hypothesized that administrators would develop indifference and cynicism about their work in order to gain distance from its exhausting demands. This reaction is expected to be dysfunctional in that cynicism reduces the energy available for performing work and for developing creative solutions to the problems work presents. Therefore, cynicism is expected to positively correlate with exhaustion and negatively correlate with professional efficacy.

In this study, the MBI–GS scale measures nursing home administrators’ relationship to their work on a continuum from engagement to burnout. The engagement period is when the administrator is dedicated to their work and is confident in their ability to perform all tasks effectively. The period of burnout occurs when the administrator becomes exhausted and cynical. The completed questionnaires were scored using the scoring key developed by Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter, (1996). The final scores consisted of three subscores: emotional exhaustion (EE), cynicism (CY), and professional efficacy (PE). High scores on the EE and CY components and a low score on the PE component indicate a high level of burnout.

Before analyzing the extent of burnout for various groups of nursing home administrators, the researcher examined the reliability of each scale. Results in this study showed that the reliability coefficient for the total scale was $\alpha = 0.77$, which is comparable to levels found in earlier studies that used the MBI–GS instrument. The reliability coefficients for the three subscales were $\alpha = 0.81$ for emotional exhaustion, $\alpha = 0.91$ for cynicism, and $\alpha = 0.86$ for professional efficacy. In social science research, a scale with α greater than .70 is generally considered highly reliable.

Emotional Exhaustion

Exhaustion refers to a feeling of being overextended emotionally and physically and is the first defense against job stress (Angerer, 2003). Maslach et al., (2001) noted that exhaustion causes individuals to distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work secondary to work overload or too many demands and not enough resources. Nursing home administrators in this study reported relatively moderate levels of emotional exhaustion ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.42$). The results show that less than half of the respondents (46%) often feel emotionally drained from work and half (50%) often feel used up at the end of the workday. Only 11% of the participants noted that they often feel burned out from their work. In addition to calculating the mean EE score, I examined the percentage of nursing home administrators who experience various levels of exhaustion. More than one-third (35%) scored above 3.0, the cutoff point for severe burnout, according to Maslach et al. (1996). These results are somewhat lower than recent studies of staff nurses; Cho, Laschinger, and Wong (2006), for instance found that 66% of new graduate nurses were in the severe burnout category (exhaustion).

Cynicism

A professional exhibits cynicism when they distance themselves from patients or the individuals who are receiving assistance. Angerer (2003) stated that cynicism is the second reaction to job stress where employees begin to take on a distant and cold attitude towards their work and coworkers in an effort to protect themselves from exhaustion. Within the MBI-GS scale, the cynicism subscale is composed of five items. Cynicism levels for nursing home administrators in the current study were lower than exhaustion ($M = 1.31, SD = 1.32$). Fewer than 20% of the respondents noted that they have become less interested in their work (13%) or less enthusiastic (13%). Only 6% doubted the significance of their work, and only 8% noted that they have become more cynical about whether their work contributes anything. In addition to calculating the mean CY score, it is instructive to look at the distribution of study participants across various level of cynicism. That only 11% of the participants scored above the 3.0 cut point reinforces the finding that nursing home administrators exhibit relatively low levels of cynicism. Fifty-seven percent of the participants had a score lower than 1, which translates into sporadic feelings of cynicism.

Professional Efficacy

The third effect of burnout is reduced efficacy. Reduced efficacy or reduced personal accomplishment occurs when the employee feels that they are not competent to do their job, which is directly connected to a lack of resources (Maslach et al. 2001). Angerer (2003) observed that reduced efficacy causes individuals to feel inadequate and view accomplishments as trivial. The MBI-GS Scale gauges professional efficacy via six items. The relatively high mean ($M = 5.05, SD = .90$) for the professional efficacy (PE) scale suggests that the nursing home administrators in this study exhibit high levels of professional efficacy despite moderate levels of emotional exhaustion.

Almost all participants reported that they can often effectively solve the problems that arise in their work (96%) and that they are good at their jobs (92%). In addition, a large majority of the nursing home administrators reported that they feel exhilarated when they accomplish something at work (79%) and that they have accomplished many worthwhile things in their jobs (85%). The distribution of nursing home administrators by the PE score further suggests that most participants exhibit high levels of professional efficacy. For instance, 93% had a score greater than the cutoff point (3.0), and 55% scored between 5 and 6.

The results of the regression models suggest that ethnicity is the only demographic variable that is significantly related to emotional exhaustion. That is, minorities score almost a point lower on the emotional exhaustion score than Whites, after controlling for other demographic characteristics and employment setting characteristics. Similar results were obtained for the cynicism subscore. However, none of the independent variables were significantly associated with professional efficacy. In sum, the results of the multiple regression models indicate that the findings yielded earlier by the *t* tests hold after controlling for participant and employment characteristics. That is, minorities exhibit significantly lower levels of emotional exhaustion than Whites do.

In the second stage of the analysis, I examined the job burnout subscores (emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and personal efficacy) and their interrelationships with the demographic characteristics of the participants and the characteristics of their employment settings. Independent sample *t* tests were used to determine whether the three burnout subscores differ with gender, minority status, marital status, and type of employment setting (chain vs. non-chain). Pearson's correlations were employed to gauge the relationships between the burnout scores, level of education, salary, work hours per week, and years of experience. Finally, one-way ANOVA was employed to determine whether burnout scores differ among profit, private nonprofit, and private for-profit institutions. The state institutions were excluded from analysis because of low numbers ($n = 4$). The only statistically significant difference was between Whites and African Americans. Specifically, the *t* test indicated that African Americans administrators exhibit lower levels of emotional exhaustion than Whites do.

The Pearson's correlation coefficients that measure the extent to which burnout scores are associated with the participant's age, years of experience, education level, salary, and hours worked per week. The findings reveal that job burnout does not vary significantly with any of the participant's demographics characteristics, including age, years of experience, education level, hours worked, or salary range. Lastly, the results of *t* tests indicate that nursing home administrators at chain type institutions exhibit similar levels of burnout when compared to their colleague who work

at nursing homes that are not part of a chain. In addition, the results of the one-way ANOVA suggest that levels of burnout do not differ significantly among the three types of settings: profit, private for-profit, and private nonprofit. (The 4 participants who reported that they work for a state institution were excluded from this analysis due to low *n*).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study found that nursing home administrators show moderate levels emotional exhaustion, low cynicism and high professional efficacy. These findings corroborate the results from studies of professionals in related fields. For instance, Templeton and Satcher (2007) conducted a study on job burnout among rehabilitation counselors and found that the counselors exhibited moderate emotional exhaustion, low depersonalization and high personal achievement. The results of this study are especially encouraging when compared to those obtained from studies where the MBI–GS questionnaire was administered to staff nurses. For example, Cho et al. (2006) found that 66% of new graduate nurses were in the severe burnout category (exhaustion). In contrast, this study found that only 35% of nursing home administrators exhibited severe levels of exhaustion (a score greater than 3.0 on the emotional exhaustion component). In addition, the study found that job burnout does not vary significantly across various demographic groups, with one exception: African Americans tend to exhibit significantly lower levels of emotional exhaustion than Whites do.

Further analysis of the findings begs the question, why do nursing home administrators only show moderate levels of emotional exhaustion, low cynicism, and high professional efficacy? One could speculate that nursing home administrators simply have a passion for their occupation. They accepted the position understanding that the job could sometimes carry burdens. However, these occasional burdens do not outweigh the joy one receives from doing a job well done. High levels of professional efficacy support this speculation. McCarthy (2005) reported that:

Administrators are satisfied when they have the opportunity to directly engage in social and altruistic interaction with their residents. This is the big ticket item for administration, and opportunities for hugs and hand-squeezes in the hallway provide meaningful outlets for professionals immersed in corporate reports and daily crisis. (p. 36)

CONCLUSION

This study found that nursing home administrators show moderate levels emotional exhaustion, low cynicism and high professional efficacy. Essentially, while these professionals may experience emotional depletion, they maintain great levels of professional efficacy and do not demonstrate cynicism. These findings corroborate the results from studies of professionals in related fields. For instance, Templeton and Satcher (2007) conducted a study on job burnout among rehabilitation counselors and found that the counselors exhibited moderate emotional exhaustion, low depersonalization and high personal achievement. Only 35% of nursing home administrators exhibited severe levels of exhaustion (a score greater than 3.0 on the emotional exhaustion component). When answering why someone would voluntarily choose to stay in a profession when workload is a key factor in predicting job burnout, one has to look at the intangible benefits of the profession. As the professional continues to grow and prepare for the next generation of older adults, the industry must work towards creating a positive workplace culture that allows administrators to balance all of their responsibilities. This is in hopes of maintaining their optimistic attitudes in the workplace environment.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Felicia Odum Wilson is a licensed master social worker and licensed nursing home administrator in the State of Georgia. Dr. Wilson earned a doctoral degree from Capella University, Master of Social Work degree from Florida State University and Bachelor of Social Work degree from Alabama State University. Dr. Wilson’s research is twofold: workplace stressors for human service professionals and treatment options for geriatric depression. She is currently employed by Saint Leo University as an associate professor of Human Services. E-mail: fwilson@shorter.edu.

REFERENCES

- Angerer, J. M. (2003). Job burnout. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 40*(3), 98–107.
- Castle, N. G., Ferguson, J. C., & Hughes, K. (2009). Humanism in nursing homes: The impact of top management. *Journal of Health & Human Services Administration, 31*(4), 483–516.
- Cho, J., Laschinger, H. K. S., & Wong, C. (2006). Workplace empowerment, work engagement and organizational commitment of new graduate nurses. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership, 19*(3), 43–60.
- Maslach, C., Jackson, S. E., & Leiter, M. P. (1996). *The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) manual* (3rd ed). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychology Press.
- Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P. (2001). Job burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52* (1), 397–422.
- McCarthy, J. (2005). *More than surviving: Keys to thriving as an administrator*. Retrieved on August 10, 2009, from <http://www.ltlmagazine.com/ME2/dirmod.asp?sid=9B6FFC446FF7486981EA3C0C3CCE4943&nm=All+Issues&type=Publishing&mod=Publications%3A%3AArticle&mid=8F3A7027421841978F18BE895F87F791&tier=4&id=3B7C400570704DA9ADD6A24AC439FC9A>
- Stoil, M. J. (2002, October). Documenting the disappearing administrator. *Nursing Home Magazine*. Retrieved from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3830/is_1_51/ai_83152186/?tag=content;coll
- Tellis-Nayak, V. (2007, October 1). Disenchantment among LTC leaders—And its toll on quality. *Nursing Home Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.ltlmagazine.com/ME2/dirmod.asp?sid=9B6FFC446FF7486981EA3C0C3CCE4943&nm=All+Issues&type=Publishing&mod=Publications%3A%3AArticle&mid=8F3A7027421841978F18BE895F87F791&tier=4&id=0A2B9674324E4719A5D6798B0D09C552>
- Templeton, M. C., & Satcher, J. (2007). Job burnout among public rehabilitation counselors. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 38*(1), 39–45.
- Zalaquett, C. P., & Stens, A. N. (2006). Psychosocial treatments for major depression and dysthymia in older adults: A review of the research literature. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 84*(2), 192–204.

NOTES