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**THE PREVALENCE AND PERCEIVED EFFECTS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL
PRACTICE OF PRIOR EXPOSURE TO MENTAL ILLNESS AND/OR
PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN PSYCHOLOGISTS**

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‘... if we can look at ourselves in a forthright fashion, then most assuredly the anguish and despair of our present colleagues and our future generations of young therapists ... will be significantly diminished.’

Herbert J. Freudenberger (1987)

ABSTRACT

One hundred and fifty-six participants comprising registered psychologists and postgraduate psychology students responded to a mail survey requesting information on their experiences prior to undertaking their postgraduate study in psychology.

Clinical and counselling psychologists/students were compared with psychologists and students specialising in other areas of psychology. The clinical/counselling group differed significantly from the comparison group in a number of ways. Clinical/counselling participants were more likely to report prior exposure to mental illness and some types of psychological trauma, as well as a greater number of these experiences.

The influence of prior exposure to mental illness and/or traumatic events on the decision to study psychology, and the perceived effects of these experiences on future psychological practice, were investigated with mixed results. Motivators to enter the field of psychology were also investigated and clinical/counselling participants were more likely to have been motivated by dysfunctional reasons than the comparison participants.

Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that psychology students with psychological problems may be fearful of disclosing these for fear of negative consequences. It is also suggested that, in general, psychologists and postgraduate psychology students in New Zealand may not be entirely satisfied with their education with regard self-care and self-reflection issues.

The results are discussed in terms of effects on psychological practice, and specific issues regarding the education of postgraduate psychology students are raised. Recommendations for further research are suggested.

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