Understanding Burnout in Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors

NICHOLE TICHY: Hello and welcome to Understanding Burnout in Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, a webinar developed in response to recently identified needs of vocational rehabilitation counselors, supervisors, and other rehabilitation professionals. The contents of this presentation were developed with support from the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation funded through the US Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services and the Rehabilitative Services Administration. Opinions herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the US Department of Education and no official endorsement should be inferred.

Hello, everyone. My name is Nicole Tichy, and I am a current doctoral student at the George Washington University. I'm also a team member with the Center for Innovative Training in VR, and I will be your presenter for today. This training is intended for counselors, other professionals, and administrators in state vocational rehabilitation agencies to provide an overview of counselor burnout and methods to respond or identify burnout in counseling professionals.

This training will address the following areas: understand the concept of burnout as it applies to counseling professionals, identify symptoms of burnout in counselors for individuals to better support themselves and their colleagues, and finally, apply self-care strategies to assist or prevent counselor burnout. Our outline for this presentation-- first, we will go through and define burnout, overview of some signs and some symptoms, provide information regarding self-care strategies, and eventually how to recover from burnout.

So let's get started. What is burnout? Well, we've all likely heard the term or at least have had an intuitive sense of the meaning.

In effort to provide a little bit of history, the term was first introduced in 1975 by Herbert Freudenberger. Nagoski and Nagoski, 2020, in their New York Times best-selling book, Burnout-- The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle explain that this term was initially described by three components-- the dimension of emotional exhaustion, which refers to feelings of being depleted, overextended, and fatigued. Depersonalization, also called cynicism, refers to negative and cynical attitudes towards one's consumers or work in general. A reduced sense of

personal accomplishment or efficacy involves negative self-evaluation of one's work with consumers or overall job effectiveness.

But really, though, what is it? The American Counseling Association uses the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition to state that burnout is the "Exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration." It is also "a state of mental, physical, and emotion exhaustion brought on by accumulated stress." In this definition, we have heard the phrase emotional exhaustion or exhaustion of emotional strength.

But how can you exhaust your emotions? When thinking about how we experience emotions, it comes down to a little bit of neuroscience. Things that bring us happiness, like seeing a cute puppy, release dopamine, while things that bring out stress release cortisol or corticosteroids. The release of these chemicals is automatic and often instantaneous when we are exposed to some stimuli, such as that cute puppy.

However, just because we experienced these emotions doesn't mean we always know how to interpret them or how to respond when we feel them. Prolonged exposure to cortisol or stress is something that we will get into a little bit later. But ultimately, we need that emotion to process and leave.

Going back to Nagoski and Nagoski 2020, they referenced this as like going through a tunnel. You experience happiness at the sight of a dog. You pet the dog and are able to exit the tunnel. However, if you continue to return to that event that triggered your stress response, like seeing a stressful client or a stressful work environment, you never really get to exit that tunnel.

Councilor burnout happens when councilors or other helping professionals face stressor after stressor without relief. They're then stuck in that tunnel. Fun fact-- not really sure if it's fun-- but burnout is highly prevalent, and some fields experienced more than 54% of burnout rates. And these rates have certainly increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sure, it's normal to feel stressed about a project or feel stressed when giving a presentation. Burnout comes from this feeling that the stress is never-ending. In the previous slide, we talked about automatic and instantaneous emotions. Feeling stress is an emotion, and it's not always negative.

There are times when we feel stress as an alert to something threatening. And that, in a way, kicks us into gear in order to respond. For example, think about when you had a big test in school or a large assignment worth a significant amount of your grade. You likely felt stressed.

This response then likely helped to serve as a reminder that you might need to study or put effort into that assignment. The stress is your reaction to the stressor, which can then lead to studying, which is your behavioral response to the stress and stressor. There are multiple types of stressors which ultimately work to engage your senses.

External stressors are things like money, work, family, time. Internal stressors can be things like self-criticism, body image, identity, memories, and even the future. All of these things can be interpreted by the body as potential threats, and not all of these stressors will elicit positive behaviors as outcomes.

Think of the stress response as an evolutionary and adaptive response. Think about what it would take for your body to respond to being chased by a lion. Your initial emotional reaction would likely be fear, which can elicit a stress response, the release of various neurochemicals and hormones-- increase in heart rate, dilated pupils, sweating, et cetera.

This is your body telling you it's time to run where, in this case, running can save your life, not running as in the avoidance sense. Your entire body and mind change in response to a threat. But what happens once you've dealt with the problem or stressor?

In this case, the lion is the stressor. How can you tell when the lion is no longer a threat? Even if the lion goes away, the stressor isn't immediately present, physically or even chemically, the stress is still there. So just because you can no longer see the lion or no longer feel your heart racing, that doesn't mean you've dealt with the stress itself.

Shouldn't it be as simple as telling myself, I'm safe? Well, the short answer is, no. Stress is a response to the environment, and there are many factors that lead to this feeling of being stuck.

The concept of being stuck-- let's think back to the lion. What happens when you don't have the chance to celebrate outrunning the lion? What happens when your neighbor tries to help and takes out the lion? You don't have a chance to complete the stress cycle, and so your body soaks in that stress and develops a new method to respond to the event.

This can also look like returning to the same stressful work environment or engaging in the same toxic relationships day after day without any relief. This can create a buildup or an overexposure of stress hormones, mainly cortisol, which can lead to additional physical and mental health concerns. Aside from the typical genetics or previous experiences, and this is a note that previous experiences of trauma can impact your stress response, there are some other reasons that a person might feel stuck or have an inability to navigate their stress response so that chronic stressor becomes chronic stress.

Sometimes, your brain activates the stress response, like when you were confronted with a new project or there is a new process for completing eligibilities, a viable stress response is to run. While it's not physically running from the new task, it is doing something else instead or find a way to relax from what was a stressful experience-- going home and taking a walk or dancing.

Your brain has now received the message that you are safe, but then you go into work the next day and the day after and so on and your brain continues to tell you to run. Social appropriateness-- think about your reaction to a difficult client or a difficult employee? Have

you ever felt this pull to react in a manner like running away from the meeting or even an extreme of punching someone in the face?

Well, because those are not socially appropriate reactions but your body is now stuck in a stress mode continually releasing cortisol until something is done to make your brain feel safe. So maybe not punching the person in the face, but doing some deep breathing during the meeting or take a walk once the client leaves. It's safer.

A client insults your work and says horrible things to you and how you aren't being supportive. Sometimes, it's safer to just walk away and not confront the client or start to argue with them. There are various ways in which you can respond to stress. The acute stress response is commonly known as the fight or flight mode, and this is how your body responds to anticipated threats.

This response triggers the sympathetic nervous system once the body has identified a stimulus to be threatening or stressful. The next few slides, we will go through the common observations of each of these responses. When managing stress, it is crucial to reflect upon how you react to stress because without knowing your response, it can certainly be difficult to cope with that stress response.

Also, as counselors, it is crucial that we continue to engage in reflective practices to ensure we understand how our stress or stress response can impact our work with clients or engagement with other members within the field. As I mentioned in the previous slides, past experiences can impact how an individual responds to stress. Research has recently indicated two additional responses to the original proposed fight or flight model.

We have fight, which is facing any perceived threat aggressively or responding by conquering the threat, flight, characterized as running away from the threat. Your brain decides that you are more likely to survive by running away. Freeze, unable to move or act against the threat, your brain now decides you are too small to fight or you're too slow to run, that your best hope is to play dead. And finally, fawn, which is this immediate reaction to a people-pleasing capacity to avoid conflict.

So let's go over fight. When you feel in danger and believe you can overpower the threat, you are in fight mode. Your brain sends signals throughout your body to rapidly prepare for the physical demands of fighting. Most signs to tell you are in flight response include a tight jaw or grinding of your teeth, the urge to punch someone or something, feeling intense anger, a desire to stomp or kick, crying, intense glaring at people, feeling of an upset stomach, it feels like knots or burning, or attacking the source of the danger. So going back to the lion, in this sense, fight, you are attacking the lion.

Flight-- this is believing you can defeat the danger by running away. In some cases, running is the best decision. Take a burning building for example-- unless you are a firefighter, it is probably best to get out of there as fast as you can. The following emotional and physical responses signify that you are likely in flight mode. Excessively exercising, feeling fidgety or

tense or trapped, constantly moving your legs, your feet, and arms, a restless body that will not stop moving, sensation of numbness in extremities, dilated eyes or darting eyes.

Next, we have freeze. When someone feels like neither fighting nor flighting, freezing is an option. The list of responses let you know that you are in freeze mode. Pale skin, you have this unease, sense of dread. You might feel stiff, heavy, cold, or numb. You have a loud and you can hear your heart pounding. You have a decreasing of a heart rate and sensing tolerated stress.

Your response to trauma can also go beyond fight, flight, or freeze. The fawn response, a term coined by therapist Pete Walker, describes behavior that aims to please, appease, and pacify the threat to keep yourself safe from further harm. You might agree to whatever your partner, boss, coworker, or friend asks of you even if you'd rather not, constantly praise a manager in hope of avoiding criticism or negative feedback, feel as if you know very little about you or what you like and what you enjoy.

You often avoid sharing your own thoughts or feelings in close relationships for fear of making others angry. And you might have few, if any, boundaries around your own needs. OK, so we have spent some time understanding stress versus stressors and further understand how our bodies physiologically respond to stress. While everyone likely has their identified stressors, there are some additional factors that can exacerbate stress or a stress response in the field of counseling.

To fully understand stress, we also need to understand trauma and the different types of trauma, especially those that can sometimes be ignored in the practice of counseling. Trauma is the emotional response to a terrible event, such as sexual assault, an accident, or a natural disaster. Vicarious trauma is a negative reaction to trauma that can permanently change the way in which a person views or make sense of the world.

Vicarious trauma encompasses secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. For example, you are working with the client who describes a history of sexual assault or sexual harassment in the workplace. Secondary trauma can occur after hearing this individual story, as you are experiencing the client's trauma indirectly through hearing details of their trauma. Vicarious trauma is then the change in the counselor's attitude or worldview based on the information shared by the client.

Compassion fatigue is often a consequence of secondary traumatic stress and is characterized by physical and mental exhaustion and a loss of empathy. Often as a result of high demands to be empathetic and helpful to those who are suffering, this can be a continual experience of hearing traumatic stories from clients. It goes back to the emotional exhaustion that we discussed earlier.

As counselors, think about some of the reasons why we entered the field. It likely has something to do with wanting to help people. Well, when wanting to help people as counselors, we often experience a significant number of struggles that individuals can bring to our doors or

Zoom rooms. The concept of compassion fatigue was first introduced in 1992 in nursing literature.

Compassion fatigue is defined as a condition in which someone becomes numb to the suffering of others, feels less able to display empathy towards them, or loses hope in their ability to help, often as a result of prolonged exposure to other people's trauma. Charles Figley, the founder of the Traumatology Institute at Tulane University, notes that compassion fatigue is often an occupational hazard for individuals in helping professions, as they are constantly opening themselves up in order to care for the trauma and hardships that others experience.

One of the core skills is empathy and empathic listening. With empathy, the individuals open themselves up to other people's pain, the more likely they will come to share those victims' feelings of heartbreak and devastation. This inability to cope with secondary trauma can lead to total exhaustion of one's mental and physical state. While compassion fatigue is not the same as burnout, it can certainly be one of the causes of burnout.

Going back to emotional overload, continually experiencing the stress and trauma of others without properly indicating that you are safe can lead to emotional exhaustion. Even before COVID-19, research found high levels of burnout in the counseling profession, noting that at any given time, counselors were experiencing rates of burnout anywhere from 21% to 61%.

COVID exacerbated the need for mental health support or other forms of counseling. However, there was no support to address that need. It became the responsibility of stressed or overworked counselors to also take care of stressed and overworked counselors. A large number of social, political, economic, and workplace stressors have contributed to counselor burnout.

One recent study by Holmes et al., 2021, focused on social workers and found that 63.7% had experienced burnout, 49.5% had experienced secondary trauma, and 26.2% had met full criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 forced many professionals to pivot how they delivered therapy to their clients, moving to online platforms while also navigating the needs of their personal lives, remote school for children, and concerns about privacy and confidentiality.

Some counselors even dealt with the stress of being considered essential workers and still meeting with clients face-to-face, thus potentially putting themselves or others at risk for COVID. For some, it can be difficult to say that I need time for myself or that there is this perception or high expectation that just because you are a counselor, that means you need to have everything figured out.

As counselors, we often focus on the wellness of our clients but can forget to care for our own wellness. As an ethical consideration, experiencing burnout without addressing it can potentially lead to blurred boundaries within the counselor and client relationship. Burnout presents not only with a sense of disengagement and feeling overwhelmed, it can also create a

fog that can cloud our judgment as counselors, leading to an inability to make competent and ethical decisions within that counseling relationship.

The nature of counseling or other helping professionals puts us at risk because part of the work in counseling is demonstrating empathy and providing a space for individuals to express their needs and concerns. And even though this is a core component of counseling work, it also places an increased risk for the overall profession to experience burnout. This can further demonstrate the conflicting experiences because as mental health and vocational rehabilitation services become more accessible and more people are aware of these services, the more people who then seek these services.

Yes, this is certainly a good thing. But it also leads to higher counselor caseloads. It certainly seems like a catch-22. OK. Shifting gears a little bit.

We have learned about burnout and trauma, but how can we recognize if we are experiencing burnout or some of our friends or colleagues are experiencing burnout? Some professionals have noted that feelings of burnout can be different for everyone, with some noting a level of disengagement or difficulty staying present during meetings or sessions with clients. Others describe burnout as the sense of being overwhelmed-- too much on your plate and not enough time to feel like you're doing a good job or even have an ability to take pride in the work you do, which can certainly feel demoralizing.

It can also look like turning down invitations, such as joining coworkers for lunch or taking brief breaks throughout the day because of this overwhelming sense of, what's next, because there is so much that needs to be done. And while this is not an exhaustive list, it can also look like canceling appointments or showing up late.

It is understood that things happen. Traffic in the morning is bad or you didn't sleep while the night before. But when canceling appointments because you don't feel like seeing that person or being habitually late, it's time for a check-in. This feeling of dreading work-- sure, sometimes the weather is nice outside, and it would be nice to not go to work and take a hike instead or you wake up one morning not feeling motivated to do anything.

This might be a sign that you are walking down the path to burnout. Other signs and symptoms can include daydreaming, feeling emotionally drained, feeling overwhelmed, and experiencing a decline in empathy. Again, everyone has bad days, but this can also be a good indicator to check in with yourself. Are you experiencing compassion fatigue?

How long have you been feeling this way? In addition to feeling overwhelmed, are you experiencing sleep issues? Do you feel constantly on edge? This might be a sign of heightened or extended stress levels, which can be a precursor to feeling burnout. Again, this is not by any means an exhaustive list, but it is meant to heighten awareness and increase your ability to self-reflect or check in with yourself.

It is also important to note that while people experience bad days, there are also different stages of burnout. And so individuals can experience these signs and symptoms at varying levels of severity dependent upon what stage of burnout they are in. Speaking of stages of burnout, there are five known stages, and they are as follows.

The honeymoon phase-- like a honeymoon phase in a marriage, this stage comes with energy and optimism. Whether it's starting a new job or tackling a new task, it's common to experience satisfaction that leads to periods of productivity and the ability to tap into your creative side. The onset of stress phase. Eventually, the honeymoon phase dwindles, and you begin to experience stress.

Not every second of your day is stressful, but there are more frequent times when stress takes over. At this stage, you may start to notice signs of physical or mental distress. You may start to lose focus more easily or be less productive when completing tasks. Physically, fatigue can start to set in making it more difficult to sleep or enjoy activities outside of work.

Chronic stress phase. You'll reach a point where the stress becomes more persistent or chronic. As the pressure mounts, the stress is likely to consistently affect your work. Examples include feelings of apathy, not completing work on time, being late for work, or procrastinating tasks. Socially, you may withdraw from normal work-related conversations.

In other cases, you may become angry and lash out at coworkers. Sometimes, these feelings follow you home and can affect relationships with friends and family. The burnout phase. This phase is when you reach your limit and can no longer function as you normally would.

Problems at work begin to consume you to the point where you obsess over them. At times, you may also feel numb and experience extreme self-doubt. Physical symptoms will become intense, leading to chronic headaches, stomach issues, and gastrointestinal problems. Friends and family members may also start to notice behavioral changes.

Finally, habitual burnout. If left untreated, burnout can become a part of your everyday life and eventually lead to anxiety or depression. You can also begin to experience chronic mental and physical fatigue that prevents you from working. Your job status may be put in jeopardy if you continue on this path.

Aside from the signs and symptoms, it's also important to recognize the potential causes of burnout. Throughout this webinar, we have discussed various contributing stressors that are outside of the role of a vocational rehabilitation counselor, such as political, financial, or environmental stressors, looking at previous experiences and how they might impact an individual's ability to respond to stress.

But research also suggests that rehabilitation professionals experience unique demands, such as devoting increased time to larger caseloads, increased job demands, regular interaction with high-risk clients, regularly work under time-sensitive tasks, possible low wages and changing

environments, and they're required to be knowledgeable in different areas. We want to acknowledge and validate the stress of those unique demands.

As an entire profession, vocational rehabilitation counseling is under a great deal of stress, and this trickles down to the core people who are providing immediate services to individuals with disabilities. Sure, we can recognize the stress of the profession and the needs of the clients we serve, but if you're already experiencing burnout, how do we fix it?

Addressing burnout does not happen overnight, but also acknowledge the limited amount of direct instruction and its importance is often overshadowed by academic demands. The Council of Accreditation for Counseling and Related Education Programs notes that as one of the core competency areas, that counselors and counselor educators need to have a foundational knowledge in self-care strategies that are appropriate to the counselor role.

In addition to education standards, the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification Code of Professional Ethics for Certified Rehabilitation Counselors notes in standard d1(d) that certified vocational rehabilitation counselors are responsible for protecting individuals from harm, and that includes harm as a result of a counselor experiencing burnout or extreme stress.

Additionally d3(a) also notes that counselors have a professional responsibility to refrain from providing services when experiencing a level of impairment. And this includes burnout, as this can impact counselor judgment and potentially place the client at risk of harm. Myers and colleagues, 2012, identify that emotional regulation and acceptance-based strategies lower levels of stress in graduate students, including the use of mindful acceptance, for example, experiencing events without judgment and cognitive reappraisal. Comeau, 2016, also found that strategies focused on improving self-compassion, such as an attitude of warmth directed inward, correlated with more self-care behavior, which, in turn, contributes to reducing stress levels.

Some research indicates that the use of a one-day training with CBT, or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, coping skills, including mindfulness meditation, identification of personal meanings in life, and the practice of gratitude, that six weeks later, results revealed reduced emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, which are some of the core features of burnout among mental health professionals, as well as an increase in positive perceptions of consumers.

Furthermore, Scarnera et al., 2009, found that upon completion of a program in assertiveness training and cognitive restructuring, counselor scores in depersonalization decreased at post-test and at 18 months after baseline. There is more to it than simply self-care. As counselors, we often hear about self-care or learn to encourage clients to engage in self-care.

But self-care isn't just about bubble baths, manicures, or engagement in other luxury services. Avoidance of burnout requires a comprehensive approach that involves the individual and their organization. The American Counseling Association provides the following as a suggestion from one of their members when it comes to comprehensive burnout prevention. Have your employees leave or hit the gym during their lunch hour and take their vacation days.

Make sure they leave by 5 PM and don't eat lunch at their desks. Have workshops that talk about stress, balance, and other issues. You can do as much as you can individually to avoid burnout, but if a system is not wellness-oriented, then it will be a bad cycle. We have to think systematically about how we do that. Ultimately, it boils down to taking care of yourself.

Your body has a language, and it is not verbal. We often hear suggestions that physical activity or exercise is often the best way to reduce stress. Well, that's because physical activity releases different neurochemicals and hormones to trigger different physiological responses. It starts with being able to reflect and evaluate your emotions and then truly understand how you are experiencing that emotion. Once you were able to gain that understanding of the emotion, you can then start to explore the trigger.

For example, you have this one client, and every time they come to your office, you immediately feel tense. Let's unpack that. This might be a freeze response, and this client is a stressor for you. As you continue to engage with this client, your body continues to perceive this client as a threat, which is why you may have started to dread seeing this client.

Even if they continue to get under your skin, you can change this response. You do not need to feel on edge or "triggered" by this client. Maybe try a breathing activity right before the session. Have a quick chat with a favorite colleague or send a quick text to a loved one. Engage in some form of creative expression with the client as an activity to foster that development.

Maybe share with them a joke you recently heard as a way of fostering that relationship while also regulating your nervous system. Again, you do not need to continually sit in that stress. Mindfulness practices have been shown to benefit students both physically and psychologically in the nursing, medical, and counseling fields. Mindfulness interventions have been shown to decrease perceived stress, anxiety, rumination, and burnout symptoms and increase self-compassion and positive affect.

Other studies that utilized mindfulness meditation with counselors or counseling students also demonstrate the following benefits-- an increase in subjective well-being, improved coping skills with stress, and behavioral regulation and reduced psychological symptoms and emotional reactivity. So how do we prevent that burnout? First, identify what's bothering you.

Next, learn about the stress. Remember that your body doesn't know the difference between real and imagined threats. Just breathe. Deal with the stress before you deal with the stressor, so breathing before confronting that client.

Find stress management tools that work for you. The same stress management tool may work for you and a colleague, but it may not work for your supervisor, and so stress management is highly individualized. Find what works for you.

Use daily relaxation reminders, whether this is using an app on your phone or a product that reminds you to breathe or to stand. Multitask your stress relief. And this looks like trying different things, whether it's breathing, or walking, or having conversations with other people.

Get realistic with time management. What can you realistically accomplish in a day? And if even you don't accomplish that in a day, that's OK. Determine your non-negotiables. Redefine success to include wellness, but also recognize that burnout does not only happen in the workplace. There's much research now that indicates burnout can occur as a parent or within various relationships.

I want to introduce the square box breathing technique. This is a great way to start practicing manipulating your breath. And so how we do this is step one, breathe in counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs. Step two, hold your breath for four seconds. Try to avoid inhaling or exhaling for four seconds.

Step three, slowly exhale through your mouth for four seconds. Step four, repeat steps one to three until you feel centered. Within this presentation, here is a video that will guide you through box breathing.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[END PLAYBACK]

NICHOLE TICHY: Now that we have taken some time to work through a box breathing activity, I want to now introduce Progressive Muscle Relaxation, or PMR. This is a technique where participants are provided prompts to tense and relax certain muscles. We will go through an example together. It is of note that this video provides a disclaimer for individuals with injuries and therefore, participants need to take caution when implementing or utilizing this video. As counselors, it can also be useful to use this technique with clients.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SPEAKER: Progressive muscle relaxation is an exercise that reduces stress and anxiety in your body by having you slowly tense and then relax each muscle. This exercise can provide an immediate feeling of relaxation, but it's best to practice frequently. With experience, you will become more aware of when you are experiencing tension and you will have the skills to help you relax.

During this exercise, each muscle should be tensed but not to the point of strain. If you have any injuries or pain, you can skip the affected area. Pay special attention to the feeling of releasing tension in each muscle and the resulting feeling of relaxation. Let's begin.

Sit back or lie down in a comfortable position. Shut your eyes if you're comfortable doing so. Begin by taking a deep breath and noticing the feeling of air filling your lungs. Hold your breath for a few seconds.

Release the breath slowly, and let the tension leave your body. Take in another deep breath and hold it. Again, slowly release the air.

Even slower now, take another breath. Fill your lungs, and hold the air. Slowly, release the breath, and imagine the feeling of tension leaving your body.

Continue breathing slowly throughout his exercise. Try to focus on the feeling of air filling and leaving your lungs. It will be normal for your mind to wander. When it does, do your best to bring it back to the moment.

Now, move your attention to your feet. Begin to tense your feet by curling your toes and the arch of your foot. Hold on to the tension and notice what it feels like. Release the tension in your foot. Notice the new feeling of relaxation.

Next, begin to focus on your lower leg. Tense the muscles in your calves. Hold them tightly, and pay attention to the feeling of tension.

Release the tension from your lower legs. Again, notice the feeling of relaxation. Remember to continue taking deep breaths.

Next, tense the muscles of your upper leg and pelvis. You can do this by tightly squeezing your thighs together. Make sure you feel tenseness without going to the point of strain. And release. Feel the tension leave your muscles.

Begin to tense your stomach and chest. You can do this by sucking your stomach in, squeeze harder, and hold the tension. Release the tension. Allow your body to go limp. Let yourself notice the feeling of relaxation.

Continue taking deep breaths. Breathe in slowly, noticing the air fill your lungs, and hold it. Release the air slowly. Feel it leaving your lungs.

Next, tense the muscles in your back by bringing your shoulders together behind you. Hold them tightly. Tense them as hard as you can without straining and keep holding.

Release the tension from your back. Feel the tension slowly leaving your body and the new feeling of relaxation taking its place. Notice how different your body feels when you allow it to relax.

Tense your arms all the way from your hands to your shoulders. Make a fist and squeeze all the way up your arm. Hold it.

Release the tension from your arms and shoulders. Notice that feeling of relaxation in your fingers, hands, arms, and shoulders. Notice how your arms feel limp and at ease.

Move up to your neck and your head. Tense your face and your neck by distorting the muscles around your eyes and mouth. Release the tension. Again, notice the new feeling of relaxation.

Finally, tense your entire body-- your feet, legs, stomach, chest, arms, head, and neck. Tense harder without straining. Hold on to the tension.

Now, release. Allow your whole body to go limp. Pay attention to the feeling of relaxation and how different it is from the feeling of tension. Continue taking deep breaths.

Begin to wake your body up by slowly moving your muscles in just your arms and legs. Stretch your muscles, and open your eyes when you're ready. You've completed the progressive muscle relaxation exercise. Repeat this exercise daily to experience the ongoing benefits of relaxation.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[END PLAYBACK]

NICHOLE TICHY: There are multiple options for stress reduction techniques, and we have only covered a few in this short webinar. Others to consider include the use of background noise. Did you know that sounds in certain frequencies can help ease stress or anxiety as well as emotions or experiences, such as fear or conflict?

Many options exist, and here we have included an example of a sound clip for stress reduction. Many of these videos can be found on YouTube and can last several hours, making them perfect for documentation days in the office. Another option we have to share is Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, or more commonly known as ASMR.

This sensation has recently gained traction in the past few years, and it's basically a tingling or euphoric sensation experienced based on audio and visual triggers. Many brief ASMR experiences can be found on social media platforms, but we have provided a link to an ASMR clip that was found on YouTube. I also want to take a minute to remind folks that are listening to this webinar that we at CITVR do not endorse any of the content or content creators and are simply providing these as optional resources.

Stress is not a diagnosable mental health condition, but it will turn into one if we don't work on it. Here are some key takeaways. Burnout doesn't only come from the work environment. Recent research demonstrates that parents can feel burnout or you can feel burnout within a

relationship. Wherever there is potential to experience emotional exhaustion, this is a place for potential burnout.

It can be reversed. We have presented a few ideas and techniques to aid in reducing or even recognizing that you are experiencing burnout. Some of these techniques can take no more than five minutes. Some can take longer, but figure out what works best for you and your needs.

Understanding stress can aid in the reduction of stressors or stress responses. Break the cycle. You do not need to continually sit in your stress response. It is possible to learn how to tell yourself that you are safe.

Burnout can be normalized. You are not alone. And incorporate mindfulness-based techniques, as they aid in stress reduction. Coping is an important thing to think about and coping in ways that work for you. Working long hours, vicarious trauma, empathy fatigue-- these are all things that are part of a counselor's job.

All of that will build, and build, and build, to levels of burnout. We need to build in a wellness plan and coping strategies. Thank you.

Here is my contact information if you have additional questions or would like more information on burnout in vocational rehabilitation. Also, if you are interested in reading more about burnout and how to recognize the symptoms, I have included a few resources and references used to put together this presentation. But you are also welcome to check them out.

Here are the references that were used. And this presentation has been brought to you by the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation where we focus on developing innovative methods to train VR personnel in their work at state vocational rehabilitation agencies in order to deliver services, improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.