

“Not just fun and games”: Experiences of summer camp counselors supporting camper mental health

Monica Arkin¹, Rachel O. Rubin², Robert P. Lubeznik-Warner³

¹University of Massachusetts Boston

²McLean Hospital

³University of Utah



Background: Camp counselors play an important role in the lives of youth (Johnson et al., 2011). As the prevalence of mental health challenges among youth rises (AAP et al., 2021), so too does the expectation that camp counselors be prepared to offer appropriate support (Owens & Browne, 2021).

Methods: This qualitative study examined the ways in which camp counselors’ well-being is affected by their work supporting campers’ mental health. Ten young adults who worked at U.S. summer camps in Summer 2022 participated in semi-structured interviews in Fall 2022. Analysis utilized a dualistic technique of inductive thematic analysis and deductive consensual qualitative research (Roberts, Dowell, & Nie, 2019; Hill & Knox, 2021).

Participant Information		Camp Demographics		
Pseudonym (Age)	Pronouns	Camp Type	Camp Region	Camp Description
Alice (18)	she/her	Day/Overnight	Southeast	Christian
Ben (19)	he/they	Overnight	Northeast	Jewish
Cameron (20)	he/they	Day	Northeast	General
Connor (20)	he/him	Overnight	Midwest	Christian
Damian (21)	he/him	Overnight	South	Free of charge
Jessica (18)	she/her	Day	Midwest	YMCA
Kirk (19)	he/him	Overnight	Northeast	All boys
Mae (19)	she/her	Overnight	West	Nature
Nicole (20)	she/her	Day/Overnight	South	Spanish-speaking
Rose (19)	she/her	Overnight	Midwest	Jewish

Youth are coming to summer camp with more mental health challenges than in the past.

Camp counselors are expected to support their campers, yet do not always have adequate mental health training.

Demands on camp counselors to support youth mental health needs, without sufficient training or emotional support, can diminish staff well-being.

Results

Interviewees identified several camper challenges including depression, anxiety, and self-injury. Some were exposed to suicide attempts or disclosures of trauma. Many interviewees did not feel prepared for the intensity of their campers’ emotional and behavioral challenges.

- “I had been kind of blindsided by the like, the gravity of what I had faced as a cabin counselor, which seems like such a, you know, an easy job from the outside.” – Ben

The emotional intensity of their job negatively affected camp counselors’ well-being, which was exacerbated by difficult work conditions.

- “Well-being was definitely not very high. There were a lot of tears from the staff. Very stressful. And I think a lot of us got burnt out really quickly. Especially with our schedules over-packed, and we just didn't have enough time for ourselves to do what we needed to do. For self-care.” - Rose
- “It's not just fun and games, you know what I mean? ... On a day to day, you're dealing with like 10,000 issues and you're hot and you're hungry and you're tired and you have to keep going.” -Mae
- “Talking to the person after an actual attempt on their own life is made... It... it was... I can't even really describe the feeling, but it was... It definitely had a very large impact on me. And like, even though I barely ever talked to this girl, I am going to remember her for the rest of my life.” – Connor

Discussion: Interviewees’ well-being was tied to how effective they felt supporting their campers. They felt more effective when they could utilize specific skills learned in training, refer campers to a mental health specialist, or receive constructive feedback. Additionally, interviewees benefitted from breaks, recognition from supervisors, social support, and rewarding camper relationships.