

ENHANCING COUNSELLOR RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Counselling is a process that flows in two directions obviously influencing not only the client but also affecting the personal life of the counsellor. The impact can be for better or for worse, making the counselling profession one of the most spiritually fulfilling as well as emotionally most draining occupations. Some counsellors flourish as a result of their work by learning from those they try to help. On the other hand, some counsellors become exhausted and despondent. This paper will focus on what has gone right with those counsellors who succeed despite the odds stacked against them. What do they have in them to persist after encountering setbacks and disappointments? Exploration will enable counsellors to check their resiliency level and emulate ways to enhance it.

INTRODUCTION

I have always been better at caring for others and looking after others than I have been caring for myself. But in these later years, I have made progress. - Carl Rogers at age 75 (Rogers, 1995)

The general feeling among the school counsellors is that there is far too much content to cover and too many activities to carry out despite their teaching duties being taken away. The level of expectations of the teachers and administrators differ from school to school. Some are more receptive and supportive of the counsellor's initiatives while others are apathetic and/or unsupportive. Comparatively it is easier and

more comforting and thus more productive to work in a supportive environment.

The school environment is definitely an influencing factor with regards to a counsellor's job performance and satisfaction which in turn has a close relationship with his self-esteem and psychological well-being. However, it is hypothesised that regardless of the environment, it is the counsellor's psychological well-being that matters most to make things happen and work well. There are counsellors who have been doing a splendid job despite the odds stacked against them.

Conversely, there are counsellors who have been performing with mediocrity despite their conducive working environment. The issue is whether the counsellors themselves are aware of their level of psychological well-being while caring for others.

THE PROFESSIONAL HAZARDS OF COUNSELLING

In a counselling relationship, it is expected that the counsellor is fresh and ready to receive clients. The client, and probably the counsellor himself, may be oblivious of the pressures that have been mounting which deplete the counsellor's ability to respond fully. According to Vestermark and Johnson (1970), the pressures may come from many sources like added responsibilities, less time to relax and tight schedules, which result in the increasing tempo of life.

Despite the full-time counselling scheme, some counsellors are still involved in several

professional committees outside the realm of counselling. As the only trained counsellor in the school with limited resources, he may be acutely aware of the need to see more clients and at the same time realise that the personal problems facing his clients are increasing in depth. This is a similar situation described by Kottler (1993).

As professionals dedicated to the improvement of the lives of others, counsellors must continually maintain their professional vitality and avoid "burn-out". Since counselling is a one-way caring process of emphatic attachments, active involvements and felt separations, it can be a constant strain. In addition, Skovholt *et al.* (2001) have identified seven hazards of counselling that can contribute to counsellor burnout.

1. Clients have an unsolved problem that must be solved.

When we are stuck in such a situation, where neither approach nor avoidance works for "solving" the problem, the result is often a feeling of low self-efficacy and high despair. It is always hard for counsellors to have a quick impact on this kind of situation.

2. All clients are not resourceful.

There is a tendency for counsellors to want clients who have resources that will fuel the success of the helping effort. This way there is improvement, and the counsellor, feeling competent, can bask in the positive change. But most clients do not have the basic resources for success, and many continually struggle with basic tasks.

3. There is a readiness gap between counsellors and clients.

As counsellors, as in other helping professions, we often worry about our under-commitment, disinterest, and burnout but over-commitment is also an issue. Readiness for counselling as described by Prochaska, DiClemente, and

Norcross (1992) is ultimately about matching our commitment and readiness to work at change with the client's commitment and readiness. This commitment and readiness match can be difficult for the counsellors to decide the "dosage".

4. Counsellors' inability to say no.

This concerns the tension between good intentions and the feeling of turning one's back on human needs. These two pulls on the heart and mind of the counsellor are extremely difficult to reconcile, especially for the novice who is uncertain about how hard to work in the helping role.

5. Constant empathy, interpersonal sensitivity and one-way caring.

Counsellors are successful if they can relate well to others via their expert people skills. This takes tremendous effort, and the relationship with the client, while perhaps collaborative, is not reciprocal. The counsellor must concentrate, and work until he is often emotionally exhausted.

6. Elusive measures of success.

In complex helping relationships, it is difficult to measure success. Even when counsellor and client agree on counselling goals, both feel uncertain about how to describe what was learned, achieved, or changed. This is worsened by the school's expectation to see immediate success.

7. Normative failure.

We accept the fact that the patients of specialist doctors sometimes die, but this profound understanding of the reality of professional success and failure escapes from our own professional self-concept. Somehow we believe that we will succeed in helping our clients change and grow. Yet, we often find that our determination, work and competence are not enough. This means that the counsellor must develop the capacity to accept the lack of success,

or the normative failure, as a component of counselling. Such a realisation, acceptance and incorporation into one's professional self-concept is important for long-term and high quality professional functioning.

MALAYSIAN SCHOOL COUNSELLOR RESILIENCE

A study on Malaysian school counsellor resilience was conducted by Sharil (2003) involving 615 full-time counsellors throughout Malaysia. The 72-item Resiliency Attitude Scales (Biscoe, 1994) was used to measure counsellor resilience. Some of the findings in the study are presented in this paper.

Resilience Index

The Malaysian school counsellors are found to have a resiliency index (RI) mean of 71.95 with a standard deviation of 4.40. Male counsellors are found to have a RI mean of 72.16 which is slightly higher than the female counsellors 71.65. However, the mean difference was found to be not significant. Generally, the counsellors are found to be resilient as the RI mean surpassed 70.00, the cut-off point set to discriminate resilient counsellors from the non-resilient.

The proportions of resilient and non-resilient counsellors are found to be 67.30% and 32.70% respectively. The resilient counsellors were made up of 58.70% males and 41.30% females. As many as 55.07% of the resilient counsellors were found in academically non-performing schools with the remainder 44.93% found in performing schools. In terms of school locations, 55.31% of the resilient counsellors are found in rural schools and 44.69% are found in urban schools.

Resiliency Attitudes Scales

The items of the Resiliency Attitudes Scales (RAS) were formulated based on the theory of self-resilience by Wolin and Wolin (1993). According to their theory, resilient people have the following built-in mechanisms: Insight,

Independence, Relationships, Initiative, Creativity, Humour, and Morality. Thus RAS also enabled the compilation of the resiliency profile of Malaysian school counsellors.

Resiliency Profile

The overall resiliency profile for Malaysian school counsellors include Creativity, Morality, Initiative, Relationships, Independence, Insight and Humor. The resilient counsellors' profile is found to be Creativity, Morality, Initiative, Relationship, Independence, Humor, and Insight. The high resilient counsellors' profile is found to be Creativity, Relationships, Morality, Initiative, Independence, Humour and Insight.

There is no significant difference in resilience between counsellors who served in boarding and day schools; rural and urban schools; boy, girl, and co-education schools; technical, religious, Chinese and normal national schools; and academically low, average and high performing schools. Different school settings do not seem to have any significant effect on counsellor resilience.

Influence of qualifications and working experience on Resilience

The one-way analysis of variance using RI as the dependent variable and academic qualifications as independent variables showed that there is a significant difference in counsellor resilience based on their academic qualifications. Counsellors with a masters degree were found to have a significantly higher resilience than counsellors with other academic qualifications. Graduate and non-graduate counsellors are found to have a significant difference in resilience ($t(614)=3.54, p < .01$) especially in the Insight, Relationships and Creativity components of resiliency.

Similarly, it is also found that there is a significant difference in counsellor resilience based on their professional counselling qualifications. Counsellors with a bachelor's

degree and a master's degree in counselling are found to have a significantly higher resilience than counsellors with a diploma and a certificate in counselling. Counsellors with a professional counselling degree were found to have a significantly higher resilience than those without a professional counselling degree ($t(614)=3.47, p<.01$) especially in the Insight, Relationship and Creativity components of resiliency.

However, comparisons of resilience between counsellors with and without prior working experience provided a non-significant difference ($t(613)=.37, p >.05$). Likewise, between experienced and inexperienced counsellors ($t(613)=-1.35, p >.05$).

WAYS OF ENHANCING RESILIENCE

The theory of resilience stresses the importance of one's ability to recover quickly from disruptive change, illness, or misfortune without being overwhelmed or acting in dysfunctional ways. Highly resilient people thrive in situations that wear others down. To thrive means to gain strength from adversity without becoming a victim. Thriving also means to become better in circumstances that make others bitter (Al Siebert, 1996). However, despite individual uniqueness in responding to difficult situations or events, all highly resilient people have similar strengths and skills, which enable them to maintain their resiliency with very little fluctuation.

Help and support from others

In Sharil's (2003) study, almost a third of Malaysian school counsellors were found to be non-resilient which should be a concern to the counselling services in schools. Fortunately, resiliency is a psychological strength, which can be nurtured and developed. What these counsellors need is the necessary help and support by the authorities concerned as well as their colleagues to foster and boost their resiliency.

Even those who were found to be resilient need to constantly monitor their own resiliency to avoid any major fluctuations. It is also timely to remind ourselves in the counselling profession to take stock of our own well-being and that of our colleagues as we strive to serve our clientele. In this way, we are able to safeguard the good image of this fledging profession in Malaysia.

Characteristics of a Profile of Resilience

In the Malaysian school counselling context, the highly resilient counsellors' profile could be emulated by others to enhance their resiliency. The highly resilient counsellors' profile is Creativity, Relationships, Morality, Initiative, Independence, Humour, and Insight. Generally they are creative in collaborating and forging collegiality anchored by the morality to mutually enrich or enhance one another's development. They are also proactive, able to work quite independently, able to see the humorous side of things and events, and insightful.

Without disregarding the importance of interpersonal relationships in promoting one's resiliency, the theory of resilience emphasises one's cognitive and affective capacities, which are intrapersonal in nature, to thrive well under stressful situations. This could be achieved through self-reflection, self-awareness, self-monitoring, positive self-talk which counsellors normally, in a subtle manner, encourage their clients to practise, in order to get out of their predicaments.

In the same manner, the counsellors themselves need to constantly practise what they preach to safeguard and promote their own well-being. The more discerning ones may want to practise other forms of self-therapy like bibliotherapy, humour therapy, and even laughter therapy.

Sense of Humour

Generally, the work culture has always been serious and solemn. There are not many counsellors with a good sense of humour. Thus,

it is not surprising to find humour to be ranked last in most of the profiles compiled. The ability to see the lighter, funny, sides of matters and to laugh at our own errors is rather remote. Since humour is rather culture biased, it will take time to see this resiliency skill being used widely in Malaysia.

Probably the counsellor educators need to incorporate some sense of humour in their training sessions. After all, humour and laughter promote good health by relieving stress and releasing frustrations. When used appropriately, humour can diffuse volatile situations to facilitate rapport building. It also functions as a means of escape from the monotony of our daily regimen.

Long-term Training programme

It has been found that counsellors who have a professional counselling degree tend to have a significantly higher level of resilience compared to their counterparts who do not have one. In this light, the on-going effort by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to upgrade the counsellors' academic and professional credentials to at least a bachelor degree is highly laudable. More counsellors should make use of the opportunity to pursue a post-graduate degree in counselling.

Both Kottler (1993) and Corey *et al.* (1993) found that many counsellors chose this profession with the noble intention of helping out others without really knowing the job demands and hazards. Similarly in Malaysia, many students, even post-graduate students, do not know what is expected of them in this profession. Thus, the counsellor educators need to conscientiously develop their trainees' resilience in order for them to take on the challenges when they go out to the field after graduation. Putting them through a long-term resiliency programme throughout their training is definitely an important option to be considered. Hopefully, this will help to reduce the proportion of non-resilient school counsellors as found in this study.

Self-care

In our compassion to care for others, we need to exercise a high level of self-care too. Undoubtedly, balancing self-care and other-care is often a struggle for counsellors and others in the helping profession. The process of caring is made up of a series of emphatic attachments, active involvements, and felt separations. The ability to engage in this so called "caring cycle" is the main determinant of our success.

However, the constant need to recreate the cycle of caring can lead to depletion and burnout (Skovholt *et al.*, 2001). Thus, self-monitoring and self-renewal are essential processes that we need to be constantly engaged in to protect ourselves from succumbing to work demand and unrelenting pressure.

Practical experiential sessions

The counselling training programmes are generally focused on clients. This is consistent with the nature of counselling and the people in it. Most of the training hours are spent on how to take care of others, with relatively little attention given to care for the self. The important aspect of self-care, self-monitoring, self-renewal, self-enhancement, and to a certain extent self-therapy needs to be given more emphasis not only through academic exercises but practical, experiential sessions as well.

This could probably be incorporated into the counselling theory course, group counselling, or the counselling ethics and issues courses. This will help the students to find ways to be resilient under difficult situations, which is very much expected of them as role models to other people. This also concurs with the concept of focusing on personality development rather than the problems.

Regular meetings

As it is, Malaysian school counsellors seldom meet one another. It is time that more frequent

formal meetings at the district, state and national level be held. The agenda of the infrequent meetings that were held have always been administrative in nature pertaining to the implementation of programmes and activities. The focus or emphasis has always been on ways and means to provide better care and service to the clientele. The issue of counsellors' personal well-being has always been side-stepped. The authorities concerned at the Ministry of Education need to be more sensitive about this.

Such meetings should be used as a platform or forum for the counsellors to forge collegiality, enhance collaboration, share their success, and probably ventilate their anger and frustrations professionally. In short, there needs to be a provision in such meetings for the counsellors to self-reflect and take stock of their psychological wellness through group processes. They may even want to run a resiliency programme for themselves!

CONCLUSION

Despite all these overwhelming demands, hazards, duties and responsibilities, the expectation of the counsellor's fitness and competency remains constant. Therefore, the counsellor must be sensitively aware of his own needs and psychological deficits as 'preached' to his clients. According to Vestermark and Johnson (1970), self-monitoring and self-renewal are two related processes that help professionals so that they will not be overwhelmed by the pressures of work.

To achieve this, the counsellor needs to be alert and responsive to subtle signs of fatigue. He needs to focus on areas of depletion and analyse the complexities surrounding his self-monitoring process and consider ways of achieving renewal. Skovholt *et al.* (2001) also addressed this issue regarding counsellor professional and personal sustenance in relation to their professional longevity.

In summary, the job demands, expectations,

hazards, and risks are constantly impinging on the counsellors' psychological well-being. Under such stressful working conditions, it is their ability to exercise self-care, by practicing resiliency skills that enable them to soldier on. Their competence in these skills determines their level of resiliency and this distinguishes the resilient counsellors from the non-resilient.

NOTE

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