

## Self-Care Strategies in Novice Malaysian Counselors: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** Wellness in counselor training has received rising attention in the recent years. However, balancing between self-care and other care is frequently a challenging for novice counselors. The procedure of caring is invented of steady series of felt separations, active involvements and empathic attachments. The ability to involve in the caring cycle is essential for success. However, few wellness programs have been explained that as proof based theoretical model as a guide.

**Key words:** Self-care strategies, novice counselors, caring cycle, emotional, Malaysian counsellor

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### INTRODUCTION

Self-care is the preparation of activities which individuals in person commence and achieve on their own behalf to preserve well-being, health and life (Skovholt *et al.*, 2001). Self-care strategy also is a most significant concept in health promotion which refers to decisions and achievements that an individual may take to cope with a health subject or to progress her or his health principally when she or he is going through a challenging and stressful time (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2010).

Balancing self-care and other-care is often a struggle for counselors and others in the helping professions. The process of caring is divided into one of these items: Constant series of empathic attachments, felt separations and active involvements. It is important to know that one of the most important factors for success is the ability to engage continually in the caring cycle. Although, the constant need to re-create the cycle of caring may lead to counselor burnout and depletion. The fundamental rewards usually felt by helping professionals may be deeply expressive and satisfying but most of the time, the work is challenging and often hard and problematic for reasons frequently beyond the counselors' control (Culver, 2011).

The problematic and difficult nature of the work is exclusively salient for novice helpers who frequently enter practice as a novel canoeist enters white water with anxiety, a crude map, some instruction and some previous life experience (Franklin, 2011). Whereas, novices tend to feel unprepared and inadequate,

professionals frequently feel stressed by one of these factors: Issues that challenge their competency, unmotivated or resistant clients, breaches in their personal and professional relationships and intrapersonal life crises that challenge their professional roles. Attentiveness of these sources of counselor stress and frustration is very important to help inoculate counselors from becoming depleted, overwhelmed or ultimately burned out (Ellis *et al.*, 2011).

In a study using an Adlerian framework to examine doctoral and master's level counseling graduate students' wellness during their 1st year of graduate school, Myers *et al.* (2003) explained that counseling graduate students had higher levels of overall wellness when it compared with scores of the common adult sample. The scientists and researchers analyzed data from the Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle (WEL) assessment database which is based on the wheel of wellness model (Myers *et al.*, 2004). Myers and Sweeney (2005), also explained that doctoral students had higher levels of total wellness than master's level students in one of these areas, areas of sense of control, intellectual stimulation and work. Researchers have to know that non-caucasian students and researchers found out and explained higher levels of wellness in the area of cultural identity than did caucasian students.

Although, Myers *et al.* (2003) explained that counseling graduate students' wellness levels were higher than the adult sample, a number of reseachers have recommended integrating wellness programs into counselor education and latest research in these days has examined various ways to infuse wellness into counselor

preparation (Roach and Young, 2007; Schure *et al.*, 2008). For instance, some researchers and scientists have reported the impact and effect of elective courses focusing on aspects of counselor self-care and wellness (Newsome *et al.*, 2006).

Roach and Young (2007) examined wellness levels between a cross-section of students and they found out that students in counseling programs have a higher level of wellness than the general public. They also found that wellness does not increase over the course of graduate provision. These researchers concluded, although counselor education students are uncovered to many of the conceptions of wellness, researchers have to know that the means for effectively implementing strategies to educate and evaluate student progress in this area stays vague and largely neglected (Roach and Young, 2007). In another way, along with professional self-care, personal self-care is very important to professional stamina. Balancing the four personal dimensions of wellness physical, emotional, spiritual and social is dominant. Counselors need to be assertive about their wellness (Capuzzi, 2008).

In the field of human services, there are various rewards, as well as several stressors when helping others. While one can derive great pleasure and self-satisfaction in assisting those at risk or in need, there is also a point where stress and burnout become factors in expert self-care. This burnout may happen for a myriad of reasons which containing a heavy caseload, the nature and intensity of a case, low financial compensation, unrealistic expectations from superiors or a sense of helplessness when a client's situation does not expand and improve. Researchers have to know that there are not many examples that can compromise the effectiveness of a helping expert (Maiter *et al.*, 2009).

Self-care for all helping professionals is crucial so that they can continue to serve their respective clients with maximum effectiveness. Furthermore, the ability of a helping professional to be able to understand himself or herself is just as important as the individuals he or she is trying to understand. To succeed in a situation like this, there needs to be time that is devoted exclusively to the helping expert with the purpose of assess self-renewal and reflection, as well as quality time far away from the issues of work (Kostouros and McLean, 2006).

The focus for helping professionals when they working with clients is ultimately placed on the wellness of the singular being helped and consequently, personal wellness is over-looked most of the time and thus the recognition of wellness for the helping professional becomes secondary. While, the client is prescribed various techniques and strategies to help overcome the

problems he or she faces, usually this information is not transferred to personal self-care for the counselor (O'Halloran and Linton, 2000). The reasons for the latter situation can be examined from several various angles. Perhaps the idea emerged from the fact that since helping professionals are educated, they are somehow immune to suffering and breakdown like some of their clients. Quite simply, though, it could come down to a lack of self-awareness (Kostouros and McLean, 2006). Osborn (2004) reported that mental health and substance abuse practitioners today are besieged with several demands on their time, talents and resources. Researchers considered while financial compensation provides a means of subsistence, the helping professional sees something far more intrinsically rewarding in working with people than the mere financial gain (Haworth and Iso-Ahola, 1997). There is no questioning the merit of this incentive, however it may lead to lack of objectivity on behalf of the helping professional as he or she becomes immersed in the world of his or her clients. Osborn (2004) reported and explained that counselors are, also expected to keep up with enhancing and changing license and certification standards and collaboratively work with a vast array of other professionals in the human and mental health field. According to these risks, Malaysian counselors could encounter more challenges or even resistances in their families or communications as compared to American counselors. In a rather conservative eastern culture, the career as a professional counselor may not obtain as much esteem (Pope *et al.*, 2004). It is crucial to know that it is because several older generations still uphold the reputation of material gains in occupational choices without much reference to the meaning they give to the psychological or spiritual realms. Therefore, it is exceptional to hear tales of Malaysian being suffered and disrespected in the family simply for the reason that little financial gain in this field of study (Kent, 2008). Even with counselors in the private settings, maintaining the business itself is a constant struggle due to relatively little charges and absence of adequate clients (Barker, 1982).

According to this, the limitations placed on helping experts or professionals in the field, such as funding cuts and the necessity to be accountable and responding to evidence-based outcomes, there is indeed a substantial amount of pressure on helping professionals. Specifically as helping professionals, the need for self-care is of paramount importance because of the inherent stress that is involved in working with people in need and the resulting burnout that may occur (Guskey, 2000). Osborn (2004) explained that job stress for helping professionals or experts is nothing novel and that the challenges

presented in supporting others will take a toll physically, mentally and emotionally on helping professionals. Job stress may severely hamper the ability of the helping professional to serve best his or her clients. This type of stress will enhance very fast as the helping professional adopts the attitude that perhaps if he or she works harder to help more people resolve their particular situations their stress will decrease. This viewpoint may turn into a vicious cycle where the feelings of powerful gratification when a small change has occurred are rapidly nullified with a feeling of moving to the next issue and realizing that there is never really an end point in sight but rather a variety of that which they have worked so hard to rectify. Being able to step back and gain a perspective from time to time on what has and has been achieved in one's work is very important. The more time that is devoted to working on people's issues without checking how such issues are affecting the attending professional may lead to stress, frustration and eventual burnout. Leatz and Stolar (1993) expressed that Burn out is physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding and very stressful, combined with high personal expectations for one's efficiency or performance.

Instances of burnout contain emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of clients and a lack of feelings of personal accomplishments. These factors relate to happiness and a means to self-care. For each helping professional how he or she derives his or her path to self-care will be various (Banko, 2013). According to how self-care is achieved for each individual, the importance lies in the timeliness in which it is initiated. There is no helping professional who will go through a career and not need to step back and invest in quality time and care for himself or herself. While some may be more resilient than others, we all reach a breaking point. It is crucial that there is a self-awareness surrounding this breaking point and one must take the necessary steps for prevention in order that we may continue to be effective with clients whilst at the same time, enjoy our own lives.

The conditions which shown in earlier mentioned that Malaysian counselors must be applying self-care strategies to help balance of any negative impacts or effects from their working environment. Nevertheless, questions remain as to how to contextualize and integrate self-care fully into the theory and practice of counseling and counselor preparation in the local graduate schools because counselors need to learn how to nurse themselves first.

This study was conducted to examine self care strategies that applied by novice counsellors in Malaysia. Accordingly, this study investigates three research questions:

- Are novice counselors aware of various self-care strategies?
- Which self-care strategies do novice counselors use most often?
- How effective are these self-care strategies appeared to novice counselors?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Participants:** The first participant of the current study was a Chinese Malaysian unmarried girl (29 years old) who has passed her internship at Than Hsiang Mitra Welfare Center. She covered teenager's issues and personal growth. The second participant was a Bumi-Putra Malaysian married man (50 years old) who has passed his internship at police station. He covered all kinds of adult counselling. The 3rd participant was a Chinese Malaysian married woman (52 years old) who has passed her internship at International Medical University (IMU). She covered career and educational issues.

The instruments were used in this study were a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire adopted from Intern Self-Care Scale by Turner *et al.* (2005) which is according to Norcross (2000) described the categories of strategies in self-care.

The semi-structured interview consists of eleven open-ended to guide and maintain the interview on the path of drawing the survived experience and meaning of self-care strategies used by intern counseling master students. The questions were not including the written questionnaire. Participants were asked for MP3 recording of the interviews. Each interview ranged from 30 min to 1.5 h. The modified questionnaire includes 35 items and is called Counselor Self-Care Scale (CSCS).

Participants were requested to answer two rankings for each item: The regularity of use of each strategy and the supposed efficiency of each strategy. Novice counselors' method of response to the items was the closed response modes of 5 points Likert-type scale of never rarely, sometimes frequently and always. Therefore, rating was from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

Researcher was considered as an instrument. The theoretical orientation of the researcher in counseling is Adlerian psychology which believes that are surrounded in a social system and the persons behaviour (Adler, 1956). Adler (1956) considered that all human behave purposely and persons attempt to find their own

individuality and for dominance while feeling right to the society. Consequently Adler (1956), showed that you are successful when you can be truthfully who you are. From this viewpoint, the researcher considered the participants and the organization to which they fit in.

**Procedures:** First, researcher was talked to 6 counseling master students who passed their internship via the phone. Second, a general description of the study and the modified questionnaire was e-mailed to those who were agreed to attend in the study. Third, the researcher made contact with all the three interested participants directly either via telephone or e-mail to arrange the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted with participants either personally or via Skype. All the interviews were recorded in tape to guarantee assiduousness in the analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed professionally. The transcriptionist referred to the digital recording. Researcher read each transcript after it was completed while listening to the digital audio recording and compared it to her field notes, verifying or correcting each transcript as necessary.

In addition in the last part of the interview, it was inquired from participants if they were eager to join in a follow-up interview. In personally interviews, researcher held a silent place for interviewing that was suitable for the participants and informed them of the place via text-message.

In online interview, the researcher planned the date and time with the participants via e-mail. The participant was asked to find a quiet place and time for online interviewing. The follow-up interviews were not carried out because during the data analyzing, no questions raised for the researcher.

## RESULTS

This study considered three important questions: Are novice counselors aware of various self-care strategies? Which self-care strategies do novice counselors use most often? How effective are these self-care strategies appeared to novice counselors? To explore these questions interviews as a qualitative method was employed. Interviews provide a qualitative method of gathering information, evidence or data (Rubin and Rubin, 2011).

**Awareness on self-care issues and strategies:** In the current study for finding the reply of counselor's awareness on self-care strategies was asked indirect questions to avoid offending these counselors. Instead, the question pretended was: What is your idea about

self-care strategies, talking about self-care strategies? All participants were able to answer this question with considerate, stimulating answers, after experimented state in both professional and personal self-care. The impressions or terms mentioned with extracting from the interview:

- Overcoming work stress is an essential self-caring in novice counselors
- Personality of counselors influences their self-care strategies
- Self-care is related to improving as counselors
- Shortage of experience can cause stress in novice counselors

**Identification of individual self-care strategies:** To reply which self-care strategies do novice counselors use most often in the present study, all participants mentioned that their self-care strategies work particularly for themselves. Each of them presented different patterns in the use of self-care strategies which reflected their personalities. Therefore, these strategies are presented as reported by each participant.

Self-care methods that were reported by participant #1 are: Consulting, writing diary and physical exercise, self-care methods that were reported by participant #2 are: Thinking of the solution, self-talking, satisfaction, compromise, using human resources and making yourself clear in the work. Self-care methods that were mentioned by participant #3 are: Job satisfaction, rest and relaxation, reading and ask other professional to help.

In summary as shown in Table 1, methods on how each novice counselors promote their well-beings are arranged along with Norcross self-care strategies.

**Effectiveness of self-care strategies:** To find how effective are these self-care strategies appeared to novice

Table 1: Norcross self-care strategies and personal methods used by all 3 participants to promote well-beings

Norcross self-care strategies	Methods
Think strategies as opposite techniques or methods	Thinking of the solution (#2) Compromise (#2)
Begin with self-awareness and self-liberation	Satisfaction (#2) Making yourself clear in the work (#2) Job satisfaction (#3)
Employ stimulus control and counter conditioning when possible	Self-talking (#2) Reading (#3)
Emphasize the human element	Consulting(#1) Using human resources (#2) Ask other professional to help (#3) Writing diary (#1)
Avoid wishful-thinking and self-blame	
Diversify, diversify, diversify	Rest and rsselaxation (#3)
Additional category:	Physical exercise (#1)
Mind and body	

counselors in the present study, all three participants agreed that the counselor self-care scale quite characterized how they deal with their own well-being. However, two self-care strategies accumulated by Norcross (2000) are not included in this questionnaire.

### DISCUSSION

The current study investigated novice counselor's awareness on self-care strategies among master students in counseling program at University of Malaya, as well as how those strategies were effectiveness. The three final semester students contributed by reporting how they take care of themselves both personally and professionally.

On awareness of self-care strategies and issues, all three participants were familiar with the common self-care methods. Regarding awareness topic they shared the following concepts:

- Overcoming work stress is an essential self-caring in novice counselors
- Personality of counselors influences their self-care strategies
- Self-care is related to improving as counselors
- Shortage of experience can cause stress in novice counselors

The strategies that novice counselors used were readily categorized and fit into self-care strategies compiled by Norcross (2000). As in Table 1 shown the identified self-care strategies employed among the three participants include:

- Think strategies as opposite techniques or methods
- Begin with self-awareness and self-liberation
- Employ stimulus control and counter conditioning when possible
- Emphasize the human element
- Avoid dreaming and self-blame
- Diversify, diversify and diversify
- Additional category: Mind and body

As shown in Table 2, all the three participants deemed the following self-care strategies by using Counselor Self-Care Scale (CSCS):

- Recognize the hazards of psychological practice
- Think strategies, as opposed to techniques or methods
- Being with self-awareness and self-liberation
- Embrace multiple strategies traditionally associated with divers theoretical orientations

Table 2: Effective self-care strategies employed by each participant

Effective self-care strategies used*	Participants		
	#1	#2	#3
Recognize the hazards of psychological practice	✓	✓	✓
Think strategies, as opposed to techniques or methods	Not applicable		
Being with self-awareness and self-liberation	Not applicable		
Embrace multiple strategies traditionally associated with divers theoretical orientations	Not applicable		
Employ stimulus control and counter conditioning when possible	✓	✓	✓
Emphasize the human element	✓	✓	✓
Seek personal therapy	✓	✓	✓
Avoid wishful thinking and self-blame	✓	✓	✓
Diversify, diversify, diversify	✓	✓	✓
Appreciate the rewards		✓	✓
<u>Additional category: Mind and body</u>		✓	✓

\*These self-care strategies are clinician-recommended, partitioned-tested, researched informed (Norcross, 2000). The additional category was later added by Norcross as Tumer *et al.* (2005) consulted him

- Employ stimulus control and counter conditioning when possible
- Emphasize the human element
- Seek personal therapy
- Avoid dreaming and self-blame
- Diversify, diversify and diversify
- Appreciate the rewards
- Mind and body

### CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the importance of novice counselor self-care strategies based on increasing self-awareness of novice counselors for taking care of themselves. The strategies of self-care consist of recognizing the risks of the counseling process for novice counselors such as multiculturalism, shortage of knowledge and experiences, work related stress were used to assimilate wellness into counselor training with spiritual, physical, cognitive, emotional, self-care strategies. Also addressed that individual wellness efforts can be supported through faculty role models and curricular and co-curricular activities. With a peer, faculty and institutional support, counselors-in-training may discover their own self-care strategies and support each other's efforts.

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