

Self-care Strategies among Malaysian Counselors

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Abstract

This qualitative, explorative study is aimed at identifying effective self-care strategies employed by Malaysian registered counselors. Four participants who were registered counselors with at least seven years in practice were interviewed and their self-care methods used were classified and fitted into Norcross's (2000) practitioner-tested, research-informed self-care strategies known as Norcross self-care strategies (CSCS). The results show that all four participants were aware of self-care issues and strategies. Most of the self-care strategies listed in CSCS were rated as frequently used and effective. The self-care methods employed by participants were grouped under self-care strategies compiled by Norcross.

Keywords: self-care, counselor, job satisfaction.

Introduction

According to *Malaysia Board of Counselors*, the number of registered counselors in Malaysia has increased to over 1,600 members to date. With the rapidity of growth in this field, it is foreseen a higher demand on its professionalism in the future. *The Counselor Act 1998* or *Act 580* was introduced in 1998 to require professional counselors to be registered in order to safeguard the quality of services. However, this profession is still in the transitional period whereby non-professionals run little risks in our law for providing counseling services. The implementation of Malaysian law in this regard is not firm partly due to the insufficient supply of qualified counselors. Hence, Malaysian registered counselors are in an awkward situation. On one hand, they have to raise their competence level at par with the standard approved by the American Psychological Association. On the other hand, they have to mend any damage brought by fraudulent counselors or psychologists who seize the opportunity to make a fortune out of this market. This condition may affect most licensed counselors in terms of reputation and job satisfaction.

Self-care is imperative for counselors because "ultimately, our single most important instrument is the person we are, and our most powerful technique is our ability to model aliveness and realness" (Corey, 2005, p. 34). Inevitably, counselors bring their human qualities and life experiences to every therapeutic session, in addition to all their theoretical and practical training at graduate schools. Therefore, if they are unaware of their own personal needs and unresolved conflicts to the

point of ignoring them, they would hinder their own growth, and subsequently fail to promote growth and change in their helpees (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2003).

Norcross (2000) compiled “10 consensual self-care strategies” which are “clinician recommended research informed and practitioner tested” (p. 710). The categories of self-care strategies listed (Norcross, 2000, p. 710-713) are: 1) Recognize the hazards of psychological practice, 2) Think strategies, as opposed to techniques or methods, 3) Begin with self-awareness and self-liberation, 4) Embrace multiple strategies traditionally associated with diverse theoretical orientations, 5) Employ stimulus control and counter-conditioning when possible, 6) Emphasize the human element, 7) Seek personal therapy, 8) Avoid wishful thinking and self-blame, 9) Diversify, diversify, diversify, 10) Appreciate the rewards.

According to Norcross (2000), the nature of the counseling practice can be exhausting and draining. Thus, it is healthy for the counselors to understand the ‘universality of hazards’. Besides, it is recommended that counselors focus on extended strategies instead of particular techniques. The trend is moving towards eclectic approach rather than sticking with one theory. The very essence of self-awareness is what makes a counselor adjustable to oneself and the environment. Norcross (2000) found out that psychotherapists rarely use stimulus control as a strategy as opposed to employing interpersonal boundaries and he recognized the use of counterconditioning which consists of different methods like relaxation, assertion, cognitive restructuring, exercise and diversion. Utilizing interpersonal relationships and undergoing personal therapy are also the way of promoting self-care. Wishful thinking and self-blame are two elements which correlate with impairing the ability of counselors in effective self-care. Wishful thinking is a kind of avoidant coping which focuses on what or would have been, instead of actively and practically solving problems. Diversification is an excellent stress management strategy for mental health providers. Lastly, balancing the hazards of this practice with privileges gained is crucial to keep therapists motivated.

The practice of counseling itself can be demanding, challenging, and emotionally taxing, in which counselors are more likely to experience “compassion fatigue” (Figley, 2002; Weiss, 2004) when caring for emotionally stressed or distressed clients. If left unattended or handled inappropriately, counselors may expose themselves to greater risks of “distress, burnout, vicarious traumatization, and eventually impaired professional competence” (Barnett, Baker, Elman, & Schoener, 2007, p. 603). These affected counselors may experience occupational hazards such as “depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and relationship dysfunction” (Gilroy, Carroll, & Murra, 2002, p. 402).

Counselor’s self-care is imperative both ethically and practically. Viewing the importance of this subject and the scarcity of local documentation on various effective and applicable methods on Malaysian counselors’ self-care, this explorative, qualitative finding would open up a new area for further discussion and research. For the purpose of this study, two research questions were used as a guideline to gather information from the counselors, which were “Are registered counselors

aware of various self-care strategies which may help to promote their well-being?” and “What are the self-care strategies used by registered counselors?”.

Method

This study gathered data by employing self-report methods. It combined both semi-structured interview and self-care rating scale in an attempt to describe how seasoned, licensed counselors preserve and energize themselves in this stressful, people-related career. Semi-structured interview was used in this study because it is easier to compare the responses of each individual participant. This is the most common form of interview for qualitative studies (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2002).

Participants

Potential participants were introduced by counselors or counseling students whom the researcher has in contact. The criteria for inclusion in this study included (a) at least seven years in practice, (b) recognized by LembagaKaunselor or *Board of Counselors* as one of their members, and (c) resides and practices in the Klang Valley – one of the busiest and most sophisticated areas in Malaysia. A total of four experienced, registered counselors were identified who met the criteria participated in this study with one female and three malecounselors.Their length of experience ranged from 8 to 25 years.

Procedures

Each participant was contacted by phone and asked to participate in a study about self-care strategies. An email describing the study and interview procedure followed and verbal consent was obtained before the interview was conducted. A pilot interview was conducted on a non-registered counselor, who has six years of experience in practice, to help determine the final set of interview questions and the modified questionnaire.

Analysis

The data analysis is based on the grounded theory analysis developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which is widely used by qualitative researchers in many disciplines. In the first level, the collected data from the interviews and the researcher’s self-report were transformed into verbatim transcription. The relevant statements were identified from the verbatim transcription and were grouped into several meaningful categories under Norcross self-care strategies (CSCS).

Results

Awareness on Self-care and Strategies

The researcher was careful not to directly ask whether the participants were aware of self-care strategies since it might offend these experienced counselors. Instead, the question posed was: “Talking about self-care strategies, what do you have in mind about these strategies?” All participants were able to answer this question with thoughtful, inspiring answers leaving no doubt of their seasoned, after-experimented state in both professional and personal self-care. Below are the concepts or terms mentioned, with excerpts from the interviews.

A. Self-care is essentially related to personal development.

Two out of four participants pointed out the concept of “counselors as the therapeutic tools”. Both of them refer to personal development in counselors as an important element in self-care, not so much of following through some specific strategies.

So when you talk about self-care strategy – No. 1: It is not just a strategy, certainly a personal development. The sense of self – who you are, what you are, what you know you’re in here for. What are your goals, your hope, your aspiration? Are they realistic? What are the organization demands of you – can you manage? cannot manage? If you can’t, know how to let go, how to assign other people if you can’t do all of them – those things would be difficult, painful, but know how to cope with it. All of these come from someplace within the therapist, you see. (#1)

... The first part [in Satir model], we greatly emphasize “congruence.” If you want to be a congruent person, you must first take care yourself as a person, especially in the counseling relationship. Counselor is the most important tool. When we ourselves are tools, our self-care is very important. (#2)

B. Individual counselors have their own preferences of self-care strategies.

All participants expressed their own self-care strategies as personal and mentioned how they work for themselves. Two participants explicitly mentioned that self-care strategies are subjective, and the other two hinted that the strategies they applied are their own personal preferences.

But different people, they have different things. But I guess for myself, apply for myself. Learn how to make time. If schedule is so heavy, I have to find time. So therefore quality time becomes very, very precious. (#1)

... Because each person needs to develop one’s own self-care strategy. They are tailor-made methods and techniques for individuals. How I

should pay attention to certain aspects and do what is useful towards caring for myself. Therefore I say [self-care] strategy could be anything. This is what I think. (#2)

C. Self-care should be viewed holistically.

One participant was doing his doctoral research on holistic development. He believed that holistically caring for oneself is important.

However, one important aspect is holistic, which is how each different aspect interacts with self... Viewing oneself holistically, how you handle each aspect and do not allow the stress to grow bigger and hence, malfunction occurs. Holistic – people have all kinds of needs. You cannot eliminate certain needs and think they are insignificant. (#4)

D. Self-care has not only physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. It also includes social and environmental aspects.

I agree with your definition that a person takes care of oneself in physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects... Not only these few aspects, there are other aspects like relationship, for example friendship. It can be termed “social”. Another aspect is physical environment, like working environment – very important. These aspects are fairly important in self care... These two added aspects, social and environmental, are according to my own experience. But according to my research in holistic development, there are more branches – altogether fifteen. About twenty something factors. (#4)

E. Self-care methods will change according to different stages of development in the profession.

I would like to say that a counselor, whether he is a beginning counselor learning to be a mature counselor, or he is learning to practice as a supervisor, all these are at different stages of development. At these different stages of development, what would be different in a counselor’s self-care? Therefore it is based on stages. Each stage has different self-care and strategies. For instance, when you have just started practicing, you stress on your counseling effectiveness. Most of the time you will focus on “Am I a good counselor?”, “How to practice well?”, “How should I master my counseling skills effectively?”. This is always troubling as a beginner. But when you are more mature, you will see that you have already mastered these skills. But how effective it is? This is one aspect. When you become more and more mature, and now in Malaysia we are lack of supervisors, or in the process of your growing [as a professional], you don’t have supervisor to lead you, that is another level of stress [to that particular counselor]. When you have developed and become a

supervisor, your question now is not only “Am I a good counselor?”, you have to also ask “Am I a good supervisor?”. Therefore you have different roles now. (#2)

Identification of Individual Self-care Strategies

Every participant emphasized that their self-care strategies works particularly for themselves. Each of them presented different patterns in the use of self-care strategies which pertain to their personalities and theoretical orientations. Therefore, these self-care methods are presented as reported by each participant.

Self-care methods reportedly used by Participant #1 are:

i) Prioritization

You have to prioritize certain things, some things are more important than other things.

ii) Delegation

You have to learn how to delegate. You cannot be superman. You are not expected to be superman. There is only one of you. You have to plan for things ahead of time. You do not create the mechanism for whatever happens, need to cope and deal with things, it is part of the delegation process.

iii) Plug into various sources

But when you are also involved in the business..., and everyday you are just bombarded with so much negativity. Learning to be what we called Jung: self-generating personality, learning to plug into various sources.

iv) Finding quality time

Learn how to make time. If schedule is so heavy, I have to find time. So therefore quality time becomes very, very precious.

v) Saying “No” (or boundary setting)

Find time on weekends is something I have to learn now to say no. Sundays, Saturdays, weekdays in the evening,... call me to take a client. “No I manage only one client a semester, outside of my hours”... So when weekend comes, I have to then be cancelable, know how to make certain kinds of judgment.

vi) Know my limit

During the day, I have already seen a lot of my in-house clients, my student clients, my supervisees that I supervise, so I help through that.

For my own personal practice, I have to limit. Much as you want to earn that some additional income ... you have to recognize there is only so much. I am already teaching night class. I am already supervising beyond 6-7 o'clock. I'm in the office in the morning at the same time, 9 o'clock, like everybody else. So I won't be of any use to anyone if I just keep going this way.

vii) Healthy sense of self

Those decisions have to come from your own sense of self. So if you on the one hand think that you have to be the savior of the rest of the world, people can't live without you, feel so bad when you say no to people. Which comes from a lot of our influence of insecurity and lack of awareness about ourselves.

viii) Make time for yourself

And so among other things when you do make time for yourself. Then you have to go into continue with your own reading. Your own personal growth and development because your own personal reflection. Time for yourself. So all of us have different tastes now. For some of us, we read. Others may not do.

ix) Being with people or family

For me, my own personal preference is talking to people, being with people that are important to me, spending time with your family.

x) Involve in activities outside work

... getting involved in different kinds of activities outside of your normal work, kind of things.

xi) Religious or spirituality involvement

I was a religious member of that organization. Even though I've left, I still go back once in a while whenever they have programs... Whenever I go back there... but being part of that process energizes me. Also, it helps me [to] remember other values, the beliefs... So to be able to plug in with that sort of things once in a while, those are what help you to put in perspective in many things you do.

Self-care methods reportedly used by Participant #2 are:

i) Awareness of my own reactions

When I begin to pay special attention to myself, there are a few aspects that are important. I become quite aware of any reactions I have. How I react to myself and others. I will pay extra attention to my intrapersonal process. I am very sensitive towards my thoughts, actions, feelings, expectations, perception of self-worth, sense of self,

self-image acceptance. This kind of awareness is built up slowly, from time to time. My well-being could not be acknowledged in the beginning.

ii) Well-being (To be vs To do)

Another term is well-being. How do I take care of my well-being. It is interesting to separate this word – when you feel ‘well’, and you take care of your ‘being’, and you will have ‘well-being’. But for most people, they have a lot of ‘doings’. You do a lot of things. Have you ever think about your being? How ‘to be’ versus what ‘to do’? ... When you are “being,” always remember that “live well” is very important.

iii) Focus on here and now

For example, “being” – what is the meaning of life? Not necessary have to be successful. Must understand myself. Must focus on here and now. From moment to moment, time to time. Your awareness towards yourself.

iv) Appreciate my limitation

Appreciate yourself as a human being with limitation.

v) Relationship with others

For me, how each relationship enriches my “self” is important. How can we nourish the relationship with others? Or in our working environment? We emphasize how we interact with these chances. How we enrich our “self”. This section would come back to what we say in communication.

Self-care methods reportedly used by Participant #3 are:

i) Appreciative attitude towards life

The attitude towards life. People should have some stress. Important that people find the balance in their lives. And then they know how to appreciate ...

ii) Goals in life

Most of the stress is what they don't have control about. They don't know how to handle... There must have some goals in your life. Once you have goal, whatever stress you experience, you know what you want in life. And you know in this anticipation... there may be some family argument you may be having, there will be some imbalance in the way.

iii) Nature watch

Nature watch.

iv) Talking with people

Even having conversation on the telephone. I get involved with talking with people. I talk to the class.

v) Take a nap

Find ways to handle my stress. I do not take medication. When I know that my body is under stress, I will learn to relax, lie down straight and taking nap whatever 20 minutes that I have.

vi) Realistic anticipation

And handling my stress. Handle accordingly. If you know that you can't handle the stress, why should you get into it? If it is part of your job, you anticipate what will happen. If you don't do this, you don't do that.

vii) Good diet

For instance, I avoid taking food that is unhealthy or bad habit. That can add to my stress. Then avoid it. I just eat a little bit of this, a little bit of that. I eat a lot of vegetables. I drink a lot of water. One way to get rid of fat in our body. Don't get into alcohol. Someone bring alcohol beverage. To me, if you want it, just fine. But I don't want it.

viii) Control the outcome through my own actions

Knowing my own personality... Plan sometimes. You should know the consequences. But things will not happen the way you want it to happen. What you can anticipate is your action, in your action. And then you know how to handle your life.

ix) Quality sleep

Tomorrow I have to go to KLIA. Wake up at 6 o'clock in the morning (sometimes 5). I sleep at 2am. But I must have very, very deep sleep. Then I am refreshed. Because I have lots of works to do. I'm not a person who enjoys sleeping long. I take a nap once a while. Sleeping is avoiding what I should be doing. At the end, I'm suffering the consequences; 4 hours. The most is 5, sometimes I might get 6; 7 is very seldom.

... driving here and there on my own, 6 hours drive. I'm driving, wherever my clients are. If I don't have that quality sleep, then I might be in danger.

x) Taking control

Doing absolutely nothing. Reading. Back massage, reflexology. But I don't depend on all those things. I want to do something that I have control of it. I don't want people to do that for me.

You do not need somebody's help. People are not always a good source. I am in control. I don't have to have people. I don't have to have other things. I act on it. I do on it. Whatever I want to do. I do not depend on going to the gym, to the spa. I never go to the spa.

xi) Do chores myself

I do not have to have others. I do it myself. I do my own manicure, pedicure or whatever they are. I iron my own shirt. I do all my ironing. I enjoy ironing.

xii) Pay attention to my dreams

I pay attention to my dreams. But I know that when I'm under stress, my dreams would be depressive... tension. Body's telling me that it's not wise to have caused some imbalance.

Self-care methods reportedly used by Participant #4 are:

On the physical aspect:

i) Simple exercises

ii) Nutrition intake, e.g. less meat

Now that I am older, I found I can't be like when I was younger. Last time I could regularly do certain things with discipline, like exercise, go to gym, jogging. I discover now many things are coming. I have less discipline to do something. But I will remind myself to do some simple exercises, for example, jogging. But not like last time.

Another thing, I pay more attention to what I eat. Now I consume lesser meat. Last time, I like to eat meat and I eat a lot. Last time when I was stressful, I eat more meat. But now I try to cut off. Well, physically, I do these things to help myself. Nutrition intake, and exercise.

On the social aspect:

iii) Do not talk about counseling with friends

iv) Networking with other professionals

v) Spend more time with family

Socially, I retain my own personal living space. For example, I do not like to play professional role. When I am with my friend, I will avoid doing a lot of things in my professional role. Well, when you are a counselor, many people will see you as one in your daily life. These people include your friends, relatives. They will ask you a lot questions. In the beginning when you do this job, you are happy that you can use

the skills in many ways – in your personal life, and friends that you know. Then you discover that your territory is narrower. You discover that you are contained in the role as a counselor. Then I began not to talk about counseling with my friends. I don't take cases with them. "I'm sorry, I can introduce you a very good counselor. But I don't want to touch this issue right now."

Socially, simultaneously, I keep in touch with many professionals (in the same profession). As I say, you cannot survive alone in this profession. The professional can be a counselor or psychologist. When needed, we can do case study / case discussion / peer supervision. I think it is very important for me, professionally.

So socially, I have individual, personal life. I have some professional circles. Now I appreciate more in my familial relationships. Last time, to venture out, I don't have much thoughts or worries. But now I would spend more time with my family. This is the aspect of social.

On the spiritual aspect:

vi) Spiritual insights on self-transcendence

vii) Religious practices, e.g. mindfulness meditation

Spiritual. I start to have some religious beliefs. I'm a Buddhist. It is not only a religion. It is other than just self-actualization, it is a self-transcendence process. My religion not only helps me to see human problems, it can help me to see people more clearly and sharply than when I was learning counseling psychology. In counseling psychology, it is always looking at the road in front of you, or seeing the future. But religion helps me to see more clearly and sharply.

It makes me see transcendentally than life. Religion has many wonderful practices. One aspect is mindfulness meditation. Meditation helps me to focus on a point.

On the emotional or psychological aspect:

viii) Social support

ix) Using other resources, for example, exercise

Emotional, psychological. It pertains to the other aspects. When you feel down or tired, I will go back to social support. There are some people who accepts me and do not think that counselors do not have problems. When I figure why I am so disturbed in [a particular] matter, I later discover that I had a blind spot. I will relate to other resources, including jogging. And my mind will become clearer. My physical body becomes better.

And the last method is:

x) Personal time and space, reading, listening to music, and traveling

Will keep a personal time and space for myself. Reading, listening to music, traveling. These two years I discover I have not gone for traveling. I feel that they are important to me.

In summary as shown in Table 1, methods on how each individual counselor promotes their well-being are arranged alongside with Norcross' self-care strategies.

Table 1
Norcross' self-care strategies and specific methods used by all four participants to promote well-beings

Norcross' self-care strategies	Methods used by participants to promote self-care
2) Think strategies, as opposed to techniques or methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plug into various sources (#1) • Using other resources, e.g. exercise (#4)
3) Begin with self-awareness and self-liberation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy sense of self (#1) • Awareness of my own reactions (#2) • Well-being (To be VS to do) (#2) • Focus on here and now (#2) • Pay attention to my dreams (#3)
5) Employ stimulus control and counterconditioning when possible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritization (#1) • Delegation (#1) • Finding quality time (#1) • Saying "No" (or boundary setting) (#1) • Make time for yourself (#1) • Involve in activities outside work (#1) • Nature watch (#3) • Control the outcome through my own actions (#3) • Taking control (#3) • Do chores myself (#3) • Personal time and space (#4)
6) Emphasize the human element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being with people/family (#1) • Relationship with others (#2) • Talking with people (#3) • Do not talk about counseling with friends (#4) • Networking with other professionals (#4) • Spend more time with family (#4) • Social support (#4)
8) Avoid wishful thinking and self-blame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know my limit (#1) • Appreciate my limitation (#2) • Appreciative attitude towards life (#3) • Goals in life (#3) • Realistic anticipation (#3)
9) Diversify, diversify, diversify	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious/spirituality involvement (#1) • Spiritual insights on self-transcendence (#4)

- Religious practices, e.g. mindfulness meditation (#4)

Additional category:

Mind the body

- Take a nap (#3)
- Good diet (#3)
- Quality sleep (#3)
- Simple exercises (#4)
- Nutrition intake, e.g. less meat (#4)

Notice that other four categories on Norcross' self-care strategies are not listed in the table above. They are: (1) Recognize the hazards of psychological practice, (4) Embrace multiple strategies traditionally associated with diverse theoretical orientations, (7) Seek personal therapy, and (10) Appreciate the rewards.

Discussion

The main purpose of this qualitative, explorative study is to identify effective self-care strategies used among Malaysian registered counselors in the Klang Valley. All four participants contributed by reporting how they took care of themselves both personally and professionally.

On awareness of self-care issues and strategies, all four participants were familiar with the common self-care methods. Three out of four participants shared the following concepts: (1) Self-care is essentially related to personal development, (2) Individual counselors have their own preferences of self-care strategies, (3) Self-care should be viewed holistically, (4) There are mainly five aspects in self-care. They are physical, mental, spiritual, social and environmental aspects, (5) Self-care strategies may change according to different stages of development in the profession.

The finding of this study supported most of the self-care strategies suggested by Norcross (2000). The self-care methods reportedly used by each participant were readily classified and fitted into the self-care categories. These identified self-care strategies employed among these four participants include: (2) Think strategies, as opposed to techniques or methods, (3) Begin with self-awareness and self-liberation, (5) Employ stimulus control and counter-conditioning when possible, (6) Emphasize the human element, (8) Avoid wishful thinking and self-blame, (9) Diversify, diversify, diversify, Additional category: Mind the body. All these self-care strategies discussed are within the scope detailed by Norcross (2000), and the added self-care category by Turner, Eicken, Castro, Edwards, Yokoyama and Tran, (2005). However, four categories on Norcross' self-care strategies are not mentioned by the four participants, including: (1) Recognize the hazards of psychological practice, (4) Embrace multiple strategies traditionally associated with diverse theoretical orientations, (7) Seek personal therapy, and (10) Appreciate the rewards. A further study on the following topics: the influence of theoretical orientations on self-care strategies and seek personal therapy can be done.

Counselor self-care is the collective responsibility of educational programs, professional bodies, and the counselors themselves (Turner et al., 2005). It is difficult to outline self-care strategies without careful consideration on the personal

and professional development of counselors. Moreover, the concept of “tailor-made” self-care strategies rings true as each of the four participants emphasized on certain self-care aspects or methods which worked for them. In other words, self-care is personal and unique for each individual counselor. Therefore, the attempt to identify effective self-care strategies collectively may not represent the dynamics within practitioners to promote their health in various ways suitable for them.

On the other hand, spirituality development as one of the ways of caring for oneself is highly regarded by the majority of participants in this study. There might be several possible reasons for this phenomenon. One of which is experienced counselors in Malaysia had learned how to plug into various sources to rejuvenate themselves since the professional bodies here do not provide adequate support. Another reason could be that Asian counselors tend to focus more on spirituality and religious practices, hence would have already reenergized before needing psychotherapy. The findings of the study have their own limitations because the study was conducted based on four counselors’ participation. More studies are required to find out the detail of the self-care system among the counselors with the hope of enhancing the quality of counseling services now and future.

Counselors’ self-care is a relatively less explored topic in Malaysia. Self-care among Malaysian counselors is very important because they are easily burned out due to less supportive working environment and the nature of this profession. It is essential that counselors would educate themselves more on this topic and learn to cope with our particular occupational hazards with greater confidence and competence.

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