



DLSU Research Congress 2021
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
July 7 to 9, 2021

A Conceptual Paper on Counselor Care: A Proposed Counseling Program among Practitioners

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Abstract: Counseling can be a fulfilling profession since counselors can influence and create a positive impact to the lives of those whom they worked with. However, despite of its rewarding and satisfying experiences, counseling can also become a stress-filled profession. Counselors not only hear emotionally heavy stories from their clients as they are also exposed to overwhelming and painful emotions during counseling sessions that is why they can be vulnerable to compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and burn-out. Thus, there are mandates from several accredited associations' that encouraged counselors to practice self-care and availing of counseling services can be one of them. There have been very few write-ups on how availing of counseling and consultation promotes the counselor's welfare such as: it has increased their capacity for personal and professional development, enhanced self-awareness, and improved competence and relational skills. It is observed however, even in local setting that counseling programs are mostly intended for students in schools and rarely put emphasis on counseling programs for employee, staff and above all to counselors. This paper attempts to explore the importance of counselors availing of counseling services with the goal of developing a counseling programs for the practitioners.

Key Words: Counseling, counselor care, counseling program

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of counseling can be highly rewarding and gratifying as counselors make a significant positive impact in the lives of their clients. Yet, this endeavor can also be emotionally demanding and challenging if counselors do not attend to their own functioning and personal wellness (Barnett, 2020). They can be at risk of developing problems with their professional competence and psychological well-being (Coaston, 2017; Elman & Forrest, 2007). Barnett (2020), added that counselors are helping professionals who assist their clients in journeying through their emotional pain and at times taking in that pain themselves. Counselors hear heavy stories and walk with clients through dark experiences and they unavoidably carry some of those experiences with them after the session ends. Because of this,

counselors may experience feelings of distress. Counselors have the tendency to absorb all of the emotional pain and trauma presented by their different clients whom they usually meet daily, five days in a week. Due to the overwhelming counseling experiences, several counselors have to deal with fatigue, headaches and body pains at home (Thomas & Morris 2017). Despite having their own personal problems and being sick at times, a counselor feels the responsibility to report to work because there are clients scheduled to see them the following day. As counselors tend to engage and hold emotional pain presented by clients and feel the needs of clients so acutely, lack of self-care combined with harmful coping practices can increase risk of burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma that could lead to a great emotional and mental distress (Shallcross, 2011; ACA 2014; Coaston, 2017; and



Thomas & Morris, 2017). The study of the Good Therapy (2019) therefore made sense as it reported that over half of the mental health workers and this includes counselors, experienced moderate to severe symptoms of burn-out.

In order to prevent counselors experiencing struggles in their profession, self-care is mandated by several international organizations such as the American Counseling Association (2014). The author tried to see the positive effects of counseling as one of the important self-care since there are few studies of how availing counseling services can help the counselors well-being. Counseling was identified as one of the top three positive influences on professional development (Orlinsky et al., 2001 cited in Byrne and Ost 2016) and that it has increased their capacity for personal and professional development, enhanced self-awareness, and improved competence and relational skills (Norcross, 2005 et.al and Kazantzis (2011) as mentioned in Byrne and Ost (2016).

Based on the above scenarios on the emotionally heavy experiences of counselors, it is therefore necessary that counselors must know how to practice self-care themselves and availing of the benefits of counseling services can be one of them. However, to this date, most of the counseling programs are intended for students, and counselors in training but there are limited discussions on topics that tackles on the importance of counseling program for counselors. Hence, this context led to the development of this paper specifically on utilizing the counseling services for counselors with the goal of developing a counseling program intended for practitioners. It is in this aspect that this paper will try to explore the importance of having a program by implementing a program that focus on counselors availing of counseling services. In order to materialize the ultimate goal of this research, this paper aims first to answer the following questions: *1) What are the impacts of the stress-filled work in counseling to counselors' well-being based on research?; 2) How does counselor-care or the availing of counseling services through counseling program affect to counselors well-being and performance effectiveness?*

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Counseling and the Counselor

The Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004 in the Philippines stated that the “counseling profession involves integral approach to the development of a

well-functioning individual primarily by helping him/her to utilize his/her potential to the fullest and plan his/her present and future in accordance with his/her abilities, interests, and needs” (IRR Republic Act 9258, Rule 1, Section 3). Moreover, according to the American Counseling Association, (2020) “professional counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals. In these definitions, counselors work with clients on strategies to overcome obstacles. They are expected to provide a tremendous amount of empathy to their clients and often listen to very tragic and emotionally tough stories. Yet, the client is not there to provide empathy. If counselors do that work daily, they need an outlet to receive things back. Otherwise, they would end up depleted and don't have anything more to give (Burns, n.d. cited in Shallcross, 2011). Venart (2007) mentioned that offering empathy is imperative in the profession, but this also opens the counselor up to feeling the client's pain. She added that counselors cannot be effective in their work if they are not emotionally attuned and available and that there is a need to have an ultimate balance which is finding ways to stay attuned to clients while maintaining a strong and deep connection with their own experiences.

In local setting, a typical counselor in one of the universities in Manila (2019) could further explain the nature of the profession wherein a counselor for the past ten years encounters an average of 6 to 8 clients in a day or around 35 to 40 clients in a week. Counseling sessions include students with issues in academics, others are in deep personal issues and some are diagnosed with a certain mental health condition. There are clients with issues that are beyond the counselors' expertise. Not to mention that sometimes, lunch breaks are not spared. Some clients are in “crisis” or “strongly suicidal” thus sessions at times extends until lunch break. For some occasions, a counselor may stay late in the evening as they have to wait for the parents and guardians of the students “in crisis.” Due to this phenomenon, a counselor is in high risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and to physical and psychological stress-related sickness (Thomas & Morris, 2017; Lawson, 2007). The Good Therapy (2019) reported that over half of the mental health professionals have moderate to high symptoms of burn-out. They added that those with less experience of the job, lack of social support, lack boundaries, perfectionists and use self-effacing humor have high tendencies to experience burn-out. Moreover, Maslach (2003) cited in Tayoto (2019), mentioned that too much workload, unresponsive and



unhealthy relationship with peers, lack of formal supervision, poor program support from the administrators, as well as internal factors could cause burn-out. Whereas, the Zur Institute (2020) described that emotional fatigue, vicarious traumatization, constant worries among others are also the causes of burn-out. Due to these possibilities, the American Counseling Association (2014) warned that counselors can place their clients in danger when they do not take care of themselves. The path to seeking counseling and finding balance for the counselors begin with recognizing warning signs and not feeling ashamed of them (Venart, 2007). In this manner, several experts (Rankin & Kooyman n.d. cited in Shalcross, 2011) mentioned some of the unhealthy signs in counseling such as: feeling irritated and burdened about clients, having low level of energy, problems develop at home, and losing sense of humor; and feeling lost in terms of what direction to take with clients. They therefore suggested that one of the ways in maintaining counselor wellness apart from other regular creative activities is by participating in a peer support group, clinical supervision, and personal therapy. Personal therapy in this manner can be referred also as availing of counseling services.

Moreover, Thomas and Morris (2017) agreed as they also pointed out that one way to adhere wellness in the profession is through creative counseling wherein creativity is used with clients in counseling, facilitates expression, serves as a coping mechanism. Creative counseling assists in problem solving; it can also facilitate self-awareness; naturally cathartic and self-soothing, and creative expression may help bring awareness (Bradley et al., 2013; Purswell & Stulmaker, 2015). These approaches, counselors can go into his or her own pain, rage, and grief, often more effectively and acceptably than with mere words, and deal with difficult and complicated emotions (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). These experts supported that any form of counseling, personal therapy and consultations are beneficial for counselor wellness and in maintaining balance in the profession.

2.2 Counseling Program for Counselors

Unlike in school counseling program wherein it explains the role of school counselors in intervention and mediation of problems before they escalate through individual or group counseling (Counselor License, 2020), school counselors in general often do not have an established or in placed counseling programs for themselves. What is usually documented apart from counseling programs for

students are also the counseling programs for counselors-in-training and those students taking counseling courses. Commonly, Homrich (2009) cited in Roberts and Franzo (2013) reported on one master's program for counselors-in-training in which students were required to participate and provide proof of personal counseling for at least 10 hours. Because of this practice, on making personal therapy an integral part of a counselor education program, it resulted on the following benefits, such as modeling respect for the therapy process, advancing students' self-knowledge, and providing the chance for counselors-in-training to experience the therapy process from a client point-of-view. If these practices have significant impact on counselors-in training, it is then a good basis also that personal counseling or having counseling programs for counselors may resulted on healthy benefits for our counselors as well (Roberts and Franzo 2013).

There are notable mental health practitioners who agreed on counselors availing of counseling services. Lister (2017) and Prusnofsky (2017) cited in Hackman (2017) both mental health practitioners for more than 30 years also agreed for therapists to seek treatment of their own as life often has painful events and they are dealing with a lot of people's pain. They agreed that counselors also are not exempted of painful life events. These viewpoints were supported in the study of 4,000 therapists from 14 different countries (Orlinsky et al., 2001 cited in Byrne and Ost, 2016), wherein it said that personal counseling was identified as one of the top three positive influences on professional development, followed by direct experience with clients and formal case supervision. Additionally Norcross (2005) et.al and Kazantzis (2011) mentioned in Byrne and Ost (2016) stated that the vast majority of mental health professionals who have participated in personal counseling have reported that it has increased their capacity for personal and professional development, enhanced self-awareness, and improved competence and relational skills.

Due to these aforementioned findings, the author encouraged counselors to engage in personal counseling, consultation and or therapy and that the administrators and counselors need to take this perspective on counseling programs for counselors as a healthy alternative rather than seeing counselors who seek counseling as weak individuals. In this way, counselors will feel encouraged whenever they seek counseling because a counseling program is being developed and implemented for them. Through this, hopefully they will be able to strive for self-awareness,

become emotionally attuned to self, and better manage the distress brought about by compassion fatigue when working with students, and become more productive in the counseling practice (Orlinsky et al., 2001 cited in Byrne and Ost 2016) and (Norcross, 2005 et.al and Kazantzis (2011) as mentioned in Byrne and Ost (2016).

2.3 Program Development Framework

This particular paper will anchor the *8 Dimensions of Wellness in the Workplace* by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2016) wherein it focuses on the eight aspects of well-being such as: physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, social, environmental and financial dimensions. This model implies that wellness should be holistic about the whole person and not just the parts. In this paper, the particular dimension being focused is the “emotional wellness” since the counseling profession involves a lot of emotional works. Emotional wellness is being able to identify how you’re feeling and why; it’s about acknowledging and effectively channeling anger, fear, sadness, stress, hope, love, happiness, frustration, etc. (de San Jose, 2019). This dimension is also known as mental wellness. De San Jose (2019) added that in order to address emotional wellness in the workplace, companies should: 1) Offer stress management programs/workshops; 2) Offer mental health days (day off and or counseling days;) 3) Offer onsite meditation programs; 4) Promote support services available in your community or neighborhood; 5) Provide mindfulness training; and 6) Send daily or weekly inspiration quotes.

Figure 1. The 8 dimensions of Wellness by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2016)



3. METHODOLOGY

In this section, several proposed procedures, guidelines and suggestions in coming up with a counseling program for counselors will be discussed. Hopefully, this will serve as a guide to counselors and administrators in considering the implementation of the counseling program for counselors. It also explains the nature of the counseling program for counselors, the need for needs assessment prior to program implementation, the steps for counseling intervention and its possible desired outcomes together with the need for the program evaluation.

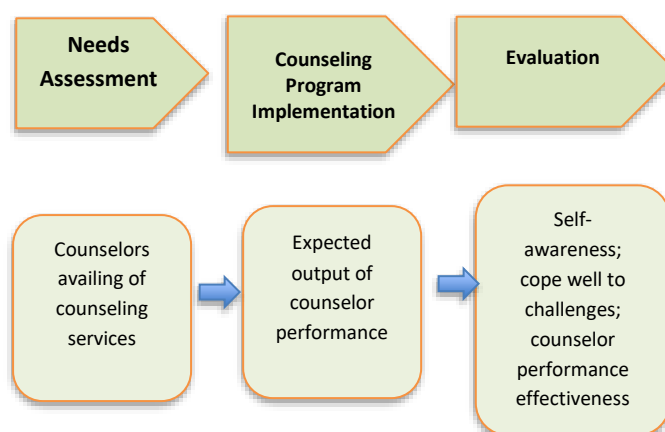


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework on Counselor-Care Counseling Program for the practitioners based on the emotional aspects of 8 dimensions of wellness

In school setting a school counseling program needs to establish budget, ensure preconditions are met for equal access, adequate resources, collaborative efforts, establish administrative support (Pennsylvania Dept. of Education 2015). They added that a successful program development use a team approach which include levels, all counselors, and all stakeholders, flexible meaning open to new ideas and willing to learn; no reinvention of the wheel or adopt and adapt when possible and lastly to be excited wherein passion for helping students and the system is evident. In coming up with counseling program for counselors, all the basic things needed in program development will be applied at the same time the present pandemic situation is also being considered. *Needs assessment* can be done through google form as part of the *planning stage* will be implemented as it determines the need for a program, the current mechanism for



filling that need, determining what gaps exist and the most appropriate ways for filling those gaps. It is described as a “process to collect information about an implied or expressed need that can be easily met by conducting training (Bhasin, 2019). Part of the assessment tool to be used will be the counselors’ personal profile that assess the counselors’ current condition about family, career and physical health. Another tool will be about assessing level of burn-out, vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue of the counselors. A focused group discussion will also be explored.

The next stage of the program will be the *implementation stage*. It is defined as a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program (The National Implementation Research Network, 2020). When it comes to applying the counseling intervention for counselors, the dimension on emotional wellness will be followed through counseling either through online or face to face depending on the current situation of the pandemic. This explores the counselor’s self-awareness when it comes to personal and career issues and on expressing it in a healthy manner and enhance ability to cope with life’s challenges leading to effective counselor performance. Afterwards, program evaluation must be implemented in order check the effectiveness of the counseling program and its activities and also to assess the possible outcomes for future program development or enhancement of the said counseling programs for counselors.

4. IMPLICATIONS

The concepts and ideas provided by this paper can serve as a guide to counselors and administrators in terms of developing a counseling program intended for counselors. Literatures posited that counselors are in stress-filled profession due the emotional burden they have encountered with their clients daily. Experts and mental health professionals also supported that counselors are human and not susceptible to life’s painful events. If not supported by his/her environment, administrators and peers, if there’s lack of supervision, presence of emotional fatigue, vicarious trauma and constant worries, counselors then are in huge chance of experiencing burn-out. Several seasoned mental health practitioners and mental health affiliated associations also supported the idea for counselors to take advantage on the benefits of counseling in order for them cope, have an optimum balance and be attuned both to clients and to oneself. Several studies

on the positive impact of counseling to the counselors personal wellbeing were also discussed, though there might be several limitations such as commitment to counseling due to financial and time constraints at the same time taking counseling lightly by portraying as good clients because of the fear of being ineffective, still the benefits of counseling outweighs the disadvantages. Despite of the support and good studies on counselors needing of counseling services, there are limited write ups that documents on counselors availing of counseling services or a document that mentions on counseling program for counselors as most of the counseling programs are intended for students, counselors in training, students taking counseling courses and among other stakeholders. It is in this manner that the author recommended that the counseling program for counselors must also be considered and implemented. The counseling program approach for counselors must contain creative strategies suitable for the counselors’ need in order to provide healthy and rewarding impact to both the counselor and the counseling service provider, thus online counseling can also be implemented if it suits at the current situation during pandemic. Moreover, the program must be supported by the administrators and that the financial and time constraints as well as stigma in counselors getting counseling must be addressed. Furthermore, a qualitative study can also be done in future researches that will explore on the effects of availing counseling services on the counselors’ well-being. This may aid in the development of a more developed and established counseling program/s intended for all counselors.

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