

---

## ENHANCING COUNSELLOR RESILIENCE

Haslee Sharil Lim Abdullah<sup>1</sup> and Sidek Mohd Noah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology  
Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
(sharil@um.edu.my)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Counsellor Education and Counselling Psychology,  
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor  
(smn@educ.upm.edu.my)

14688

### 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,