

## THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-CARE PRACTICES AMONG MALAYSIAN COUNSELORS IN CRISIS WORK

Nur Husna Mohd Hafiz<sup>i</sup>, Mohd Zaliridzal Zakaria<sup>ii</sup>, Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali<sup>iii</sup> & Muhammed Fauzi Othman<sup>iv</sup>

<sup>i</sup>(Corresponding Author) Doctor of Philosophy candidate in Counseling Program, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM).  
nurhusna.hafiz@gmail.com

<sup>ii</sup>Senior Lecturer of Counseling Program, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM).

<sup>iii</sup>Senior Lecturer of Akidah and Religion Studies, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM).

<sup>iv</sup>Senior Lecturer of School of Human Resources Development and Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

### Abstract

*Providing crisis intervention and psychological support in crisis work requires counselor's resiliency in coping with the massive adversity situations, multiple responsibilities, unexpected public demands, and their own psychological distress. Thus, self-care practices become a crucial need for counselors that provide themselves with relief, recovery, and growth ability. Although most of Malaysian counselors does not receive formal training in self-care, it does not limit them to practice self-care in their own ways. Thus, there is a need to explore what kind of self-care practices are applied by the counselors in crisis situation so that the experience can be referred as a guide the other counselors. This paper is a qualitative review of several selected studies related to the experience of self-care practices among Malaysian counselors. The search strategy was applied to collect relevant studies by using keywords such as "self-care", "Malaysian counselor" and "crisis experience". The search was limited to the publication of research articles and dissertation within years 2015 to 2021. Thematic analysis then was used to analyze the findings of the research. Three themes that reflect the phases of self-care experience emerge from the thematic analysis namely (1) before deployment, (2) during crisis work, and (3) after duty". Each theme has its own subthemes that reflects the areas of self-care practices. The analysis also reveals two important findings. Firstly, it initiates that self-care practices are a continuous process in counseling profession particularly in crisis work. Secondly, it is found that the Malaysian counselors put high priority on spiritual self-care practices. It is hoped that these findings may lead towards further research to deeply explore the self-care experience of Malaysian counselors without neglecting the essence of religious belief in the experience.*

*Keyword: Self-care, Malaysian counselors, crisis work, crisis experience*

### INTRODUCTION

Self-care practices refers to any deliberate action of taking care for oneself by doing certain activities in which individuals purposely choose to optimize their physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Richards, 2017). Exposure to various issues and traumatic stress cases make self-care practices are very essential for a professional

counselor. According to Pau, Aslina and Tang (2020), counselors from any setting are exposed to various kinds of issues brought by their clients who are in the state of crisis. In Malaysia, counselors occasionally involve as crisis responders at crisis evacuation center especially during monsoon season whereby some parts of Peninsular Malaysia are hit by flood. In Directive 20, a Malaysian policy for national disaster management, the role of counselors during crisis and disaster are highlighted. The counselors particularly from Social Welfare Department as well as other volunteer counselors are expected to provide counseling service to the survivors as a part of recovery process (Majlis Keselamatan Negara, 2013).

Besides that, they also need to provide psychosocial support which is coordinated by Health Department to the survivors who show any sign of psychological trauma. This is to preserve the well-being of the affected survivors. Providing crisis intervention to such clients requires individual counselor to apply emphatic reflective technique in order to understand the vulnerability of the clients (Hughes, 2014). In their effort to be emphatic, counselors are at risk to be affected by the clients' emotion (Forsyth, 2016) especially in the cases that trigger intense psychological trauma. This happen when the counselors unconsciously adopt the clients' way of thinking (Ng & Wan Marzuki, 2017). As a result, the counselors might experience post-traumatic stress disorder after witnessing the suffering of their clients which can impair their performance as a professional counselor and also their personal life.

Therefore, self-care practices are highly recommended for counselors and become part of their ethical responsibilities. It is stated in Malaysian Counselor's Ethical Code which was endorsed by Malaysian Board of Counselors that counselors are recommended to engage in self-care activities in order to maintain their emotional, physical, mental and spiritual well-being so that they can meet their professional responsibilities very well. Nonetheless, since there is a very limited exposure to self-care practice training, Malaysian counselors tend to involve in activities which are based on their past experience, were effective to refresh and recharge themselves. They also show high tendency to engage in religious and spiritual activities as one of many ways to care of self (Haslee Sharil, Lau & Chan, 2012). But there is little number of research that have been conducted to explore the experience of Malaysian counselors' self-care practices. Thus, counselors have limited references to provide them a guide in practicing self-care particularly during crisis work.

### **Purpose of Review**

The way the counselors apply self-care in real crisis situation still remain unexplored particularly when it comes to crisis work. It is a unique experience to be discovered

especially in understanding what the professional counselors did to calm down their emotion and remain professional while witnessing the suffering of other people with deep empathic sense. Thus, this study aims at systematically reviewing some recent findings related to experience of self-care practices among Malaysian counselors who involved in crisis intervention. It is hoped that this review will inspire future explorative research on this phenomenon that will provide clear guidance for counselors to fulfill one of their professional responsibilities for the sake of their well-being and professionalism.

## METHODOLOGY

### Search Strategy

This study was conducted qualitatively by analyzing several research findings related to the experience of self-care practices among Malaysian counselors. Search strategy was applied to find vast relevant studies related to this topic. Google Scholar, My Thesis Online, the Malaysian platform to find out available thesis from various public universities and My Cite, an online access for Malaysian journal articles had been used as browser platforms. Keywords such as "self-care", "Malaysian Counselor" and "crisis experience" had been utilized. The search also had been limited to the publication within years 2015 to 2021. Several other search protocols were also administered to narrow down the search as indicated in the following table.

Table 1: Search Strategy

Attempts	Google Scholar	MyTO	MyCite
First Attempt	Keywords: "Self-care" AND "Malaysia" AND "Counselors" 9070 articles	Keywords: "Self-care" AND "kaunselor" 56 articles	Keyword: "kaunselor" 149 articles
	Keywords: "Self-Care" AND "Malaysian Counselors" Range of date "2015 – 2021" 10 articles	Keywords: "kaunselor" AND "self-care" AND "crisis experience" Range of date "2015 – 2021" 4 articles	Keyword: "kaunselor" AND "coping" 3 articles

The total of 17 articles were then analyzed through brief reading to ensure its relevance to the topic of the study. From 10 articles in Google scholars, 5 studies were

excluded as they were conducted in other countries, 2 studies from Malaysia were also excluded as it focused on burnout issues among school counselors. Only 3 of the articles are related to self-care among counselors who provide crisis intervention. But one of the articles was excluded as it is a concept paper without any recent significant research finding.

Thus, only two publications are selected. One of them is a PhD Dissertation and the other one is a journal article. The similar procedure was administrated to identify relevant studies from the articles obtained through MyTO and MyCite. Only one study from MyTO and one study from MyCite are selected. Thus, only four studies are found relevant to this research. Two studies are from theses and another two from journal articles. The following Table 2 reflect the information regarding the selected studies.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is applied to analyze the findings from these selected publication by using *Atlas ti* software application. Before thematic analysis is conducted, researchers have to thoroughly read the findings report of each and every study line by line. For any important findings, researchers have to define the suitable code based on the ideas and meanings the authors are trying to deliver. The codes then were grouped based on their relevant themes. Revision has been made several times to ensure each code was grouped in a suitable theme.

Table 2: Selected Studies on Self-Care Experience Among Malaysian Counselors

Author's Full Name	Year	Title	Research Approach
Norazani Ahmad, Dharatun Nissa Mohd Fuad Karim, Nurul 'Ain Mohd Daud, Fauziah Mohd Sa'ad, Hapsah Md Yusof	2015	Kesan Kehilangan Akibat Kematian: Strategi Daya Tindak Kaunselor	Qualitative
Mohd Zaliridzal bin Zakaria	2018	Exploring Experience of counselors in the crisis intervention of natural disasters in Malaysia	Qualitative
Norazura Ahmad	2019	Kompetensi kaunselor dalam pelaksanaan intervensi kaunseling krisis bencana banjir di Malaysia	Qualitative

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Lee Zhi Jie, Siti Aishah Hassan and Zeinab Zaremohzzabieh	2021	Relationship between burnout, resilience and self-care among marriage dan family counsellors in Malaysia	Quantitative
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## RESULTS

Based on the thematic analysis, three main themes were developed which portrays the timeline of self-care practices that are experienced by Malaysian counselors. The themes are "Before Deployment", "During Crisis Work" and "After Duty". Each theme has its subthemes related to the areas of self-care practices.

### Before Deployment

The first theme emerges from the finding is self-care practices before deployment. From the thematic analysis, it is found that the counselors engaged in self-care practices right before they begin to involve in crisis work. The counselors are found to be highly concerned in four areas of self-care practices before their deployment to serve in crisis center namely spiritual self-care, physical self-care, psychological self-care and social self-care.

By the time they acknowledged a crisis situation in their states, the counselors started to prepare themselves for the task. Some of them started to pray to God with the hope that they will be chosen to be one of the crisis responders. Once their deployment is confirmed, they expressed their gratitude to God for choosing them by saying thankful words, praying and setting their mind with good intention to fulfill their responsibilities. Most of them believed that they are chosen by God to take the responsibilities. They also surrendered themselves to God so that they were guided all the way they served the community. This is how the counselors practice spiritual self-care before they involve in crisis work.

In addition, before they agreed to be deployed, the counselors ensured that they are in good health and fit enough to take the task. They are not going to risk themselves and other colleagues if they thought they were unfit. They also prepared medication, some foods and other basic necessities to be brought along. This was to ensure they could stay healthy and energetic during the period of their duty. Apart from that, the counselors also reported to ensure their insurance policies were valid to cover them for any injuries they might experience during the task. This preparation indicates the practice of physical self-care among the counselors.

The counselors also prepare themselves psychologically. They set their mind to be ready for the task in crisis areas. They also refreshed their mind with knowledge about crisis intervention so that they can adapt well in the crisis environment. They

also tried to calm down their emotion by reminding themselves that the crisis situation happened due to the God's Will. Having such belief and way of thinking provided some emotional relief and inner strength to the counselors.

Besides caring for their psychological aspect, the counselors also involved in social self-care to gain full support from their family. The counselors prepared their family members to be ready to live without them until they come back to home again. They explained their family members particularly spouse, children and parents about their work and responsibilities. The counselors and the rest of family members also discussed about who were going to take care for the family while they were on duty. They also arranged all family matters and basic necessities before they leaved. The blessing from family members especially spouse and parents could bring peaceful mind to the counselors.

### **During Crisis Work**

During their duty in the crisis area, the counselors kept practicing self-care too. Based on the thematic analysis, the similar aspect of self-care practices that they practiced before their deployment had become their concerned. Nevertheless, the experience of practicing of spiritual, physical, psychological and social self-care might be slightly different from their experience before they were deployed. It depended on the current situation and needs.

During crisis work, the counselors practiced spiritual self-care they used to do before such as prayer, expression of gratitude and wholeheartedly surrendering themselves to God. Every time they feel loss, the counselors prayed to God to ask for help and make things easy for them. They put their remembrance to God at the highest place as for them such belief makes them to control their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. Having such belief also makes them to be more open to accept the predestination that God determined for them especially when the counselor themselves and their family are also the survivors of such crisis or disaster. It also provides them inner strength, confidence, and high focus to accomplish their task.

The counselors also practiced physical self-care by being alert about safety information and recent safety command that were informed from time to time. They also followed the standard operating procedures (SOP), rules and regulations of the crisis center. In the process of providing assistance, the counselors analyzed the safety of the affected area first before they decided to provide help by themselves. Otherwise, they need to inform other related agencies to give help.

In term of psychological self-care, the counselors acknowledge the importance of stable mind and emotion. The counselors applied self-talk to calm down their

emotion so that they were not easily affected by the emotional overwhelm of their clients. They also did self-reflection to justify their negative thought and emotion by integrating their religious belief into the reflection process. They reported to keep in their mind that everything happened due to God’s Will, and they are just His servants who were chosen to be responsible in providing assistance. This kind of thinking guides them to be more open to accept their limitation, brings calmness to them and stabilizes their mood.

In addition, social self-care is also practiced by the counselors. The counselors reported to maintain their professionalism while dealing with their clients’ issues. They professionally attended their clients’ needs and listen to their issues. They established professional relationship with clients by creating professional boundaries. By being professional, the counselors claimed they were not easily affected when they witnessed the suffering of their clients. They could control their emotion at least in front of the clients. Besides that, the counselors also attached to their colleagues through mobile phone online application. The application was used to share information, opinion and ask for assistance especially when the counselors faced uncertainty to decide on some matters. Having such networking gives the counselors opportunity to exchange ideas to improve their services. It also helps the counselors to be more confident in their job.

### **After Duty**

The counselors kept practicing self-care even after they finished their daily duty. They did this on daily basis along the period of their deployment. Based on the findings, the counselors reported to engage in spiritual, psychological and social self-care. It is believed that the counselors also engaged in physical self-care although it was not mentioned in any of the studies.

Besides praying, expression of gratitude, surrendering fate to God’s Power, setting of good intention and sincere heart, the counselors also perform special wish prayers. This prayer was performed to ask for guidance, help and safety of their family member who they left behind. The counselors also performed recitation of *zikr*, recitation of The Qur’an and other additional religious practices. For them, spiritual self-care is a kind of self-therapy. This practice provides inner strength that has power to control their inner self and encourages them to carry out their responsibilities at their best. They also became more resilient.

Psychological self-care was also their concern every time after they finished their duty. Again, they applied self-talk and self-reflection. They were open to accept their limitation and make self-improvement. They also tended to use their knowledge in counseling therapy to heal themselves. Spending time with oneself brings

emotional relief to the counselors, helps them to redefine their experience and develops resilience.

Furthermore, the counselors also engaged in social self-care by communicating with their family members, colleagues and clients. They regularly made phone call to their family to ask about their condition and gain moral support especially from spouse and parents. The counselors claimed their family members particularly spouse really understood their stressful situation and psychological burden they endured. They gave them unconditional support that helps the counselors to cope.

Their family members also were reported to regularly sent prayer for them from afar. Besides receiving familial support, the counselors also gain support from their colleagues. They spent time to chitchatting with their colleagues after they finished their duty. This was the time they disclosed their feeling and shared their experience. They also formed support group among themselves and made formal group debriefing session to discuss any issues and find the solution. The formal and informal sharing session helps the counselors to gain new strength to continue their duty on days ahead. The counselors also developed good relationship with their supervisors, service providers and other officers from other related agencies.

Having such networking can ease the counselors' work especially when they need the involvement of expertise from other setting. Another way the counselors built their self-support is from their clients who are the survivors of the crisis. The counselors learned from their clients' coping ability to continue their life as usual as if nothing happened to them. The learning process from clients' experience guides the counselors to develop new inner strength.

## **DISCUSSION**

Self-care is applied in counseling profession not only to initiate recovery from any psychological impairment but also to prevent the harmful effect of witnessing human suffering and initiating resilience. The awareness on the importance of self-care guides Malaysian counselors to engage in self-care although they may not be properly trained for that. The thematic analysis on experience of Malaysian counselors in practicing self-care from several selected studies reveals two important findings. Firstly, it initiates that self-care practices are a continuous process in counseling profession especially when it comes to crisis work. Secondly, it is found that the Malaysian counselors put high priority on spiritual self-care practices. Thus, the following discussion and argument will be focusing on these two findings.

Firstly, it is found that the self-care practices in crisis work setting are a continuous process. According to Constructivist Self-Development Theory (CSDT),

the experience of crisis events will change the perception of the counselors towards self and their worldview related to safety, trust, power, esteem and intimacy (Zaccari, 2017). The new experience also will be integrated with the existing schemas related to belief about self and others (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998) to form certain meaning that help individual counselors to define the realities (Trippany, Kress & Wilcoxon, 2004).

It may either cause changes on the existing beliefs or strengthen them. The counselors then need to regulate themselves into the experience by enhancing their self-capacities. Self-capacities refer to the ability to maintain sense of self, sense of connection with others and to self-regulate (Deiter, Nicholls & Pearlman, 2000). It helps the counselors to determine their response in crisis situation. Self-capacities can be enhanced through the practice of self-care that provide fulfillment of basic psychological needs of safety, trust, power, esteem and intimacy.

In real crisis situation, counselors define the reality of the situation based on their existing beliefs from past experience in crisis work. The counselors also evaluate how such experience may affect their sense of safety, trust, power, esteem and intimacy. This meaning making process will trigger some perception and expectation towards the incidents. This includes the counselors' perception towards their self-capacities to cope with the incoming responsibilities in crisis work.

Learning from previous experience guides the counselors to prepare themselves by practicing self-care. Engagement in spiritual, physical, psychological, and social self-care practices helps the counselors to feed their psychological needs of safety, trust, power, esteem and intimacy. It also enhances their self-capacities to regulate themselves in crisis work, maintain their self-worth and sense of connectedness.

Since every phase in crisis work brings unique experience to the counselors, the counselors need to be able to tolerate and regulate themselves in the situation of every phase. Again, they engage in suitable self-care practices that can fulfill their psychological needs. Engagement in self-care is also regarded as an experience that bring certain meaning which in any way can affect counselors' existing belief related to psychological needs and self-capacities.

Thus, the counselors sometime might re-evaluate their ability to perform certain self-care practices and how such practices are meaningful in providing psychological relief and fulfillment psychological needs. This process of meaning making, evaluation and adaptation will continuously occur at every phase in crisis

work. This makes the implementation of self-care practices being regarded as a journey of continual achievement instead of total self-achievement (Poppa, 2018).

The second finding reflects the tendency of Malaysian counselor to put high priority to spiritual self-care at all the phases of crisis work. This finding is similar to the finding of Haslee Sharil, et al., (2012) who also studied self-care among Malaysian counselor and found majority of their research participants viewed spiritual and religious practice as a means to care for oneself. They also argued that most Asian counselors tend to engage more in spiritual self-care. This fact is not surprising as individuals' personal and social background guide them to have high tendency to engage in certain specific self-care practices (Dorociak, 2015). This argument is also supported by Blomquist, Wood, Friedmeyer-Trainor, and Kim (2015) who stated selection of self-care practices are depending on individual's personal and environmental factors including attitude and belief.

Poppa (2018) also addressed religion as one of the factors that has influence on selection of self-care. Based on Malaysian culture, religion is regarded as a way of life. Moreover, religious belief specifically the belief in God is recognized as the first pillar of the Malaysian state. This indicates religion is something close to Malaysian people. Thus, the tendency to engage and prioritize the practice of spiritual self-care among Malaysian counselors were already expected. Nonetheless, the study related to the interaction of religious belief and self-care practices among Malaysian counselors is still limited.

In sum, the finding of this review sheds light on the practices of self-care during crisis work. It also highlights the role of religion and spirituality in self-care practice to help the counselor balance their psychological needs and the demand of their responsibilities. This finding can be expanded to develop proper guideline for Malaysian counselors to practice self-care based on the phases of crisis work by integrating religious belief and understanding into the practice. However more research needs to be conducted to understand the role of religious belief in the process of meaning making of crisis experience as well as self-care experience.

## **CONCLUSION**

Self-care is a phenomenological experience which is practiced as a response to other life events that trigger the ability of individual to self-regulate. It is a continuous process that every counselor will involve in. It also reflects the ability of the counselors to cope with their work and to keep functioning professionally. Self-care practices will emerge from time to time in accordance to the development of matured meaning making process as a result of personal and professional experience of the counselor.

This argument is also supported by Haslee Sharil, et al., (2012) who stated that the self-care practices are changing according to the professional development of a counselor.

However, the role of religious belief in initiating meaning making towards self-care practices itself should not be ignored since religion has become one of the cultural aspects that close to Malaysian's heart. Therefore, it is hoped that this finding could be expended to deepen the exploration of self-care practices' experience of Malaysian counselors without neglecting the essence of culture particularly religion that shapes the experience.

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