

COUNSELLING THE STRESSED FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

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Abstract

The political, social and economic milieu in Malaysia has put many people in tight situations to make ends meet while maintaining their sanity. The struggles and hardships when become chronic will have a negative impact on their psychological wellbeing. The constant and sometimes abrupt changes can throw people off balance and breed stress, anxiety and tension. During this turbulent and uncertain situation, it is believed that counselling services could help the people to manage their life situations amicably despite the adversity faced. Based on extensive literature review, this article deliberates on the stressors, counselling philosophy and ways counselling services could contribute in helping people to pull through their difficult and challenging situations and at the same time monitor and maintain their mental health level. It is believed that the deliberations have contributed to the understanding of counselling services in Malaysia that should be fully utilized by those in need of the services.

Keywords: counselling, psychological wellbeing, stress, ethics, philosophy

Abstrak

Keadaan sosial, ekonomi dan politik di Malaysia telah menyebabkan banyak orang berada dalam keadaan sukar untuk menyara kehidupan sambil memelihara kewarasan diri. Cabaran dan keperitan hidup yang

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berpanjangan akan membawa kesan negatif kepada kesejahteraan psikologi mereka. Perubahan yang kerap dan adakalanya mendadak sering mengakibatkan ramai dalam keadaan yang tidak seimbang, yang akan memcetuskan stress, kebimbangan, kecemasan dan tekanan. Dalam situasi yang bergolak dan tidak menentu ini, adalah dipercayai bahawa perkhidmatan kaunseling mampu membantu mereka menguruskan kehidupan mereka dengan baik walaupun berhadapan dengan pelbagai cabaran hidup. Berdasarkan sorotan literatur yang meluas, artikel ini mengupas isu stress dan puncanya, falsafah dan etika kaunseling, serta pendekatan kaunseling untuk membantu mereka mengharungi kehidupan yang sukar dan mencabar serta berupaya memantau dan memelihara kesihatan mental masing-masing. Adalah dipercayai kupasan artikel ini menyumbang kepada kefahaman perkhidmatan kaunseling di Malaysia yang wajar dimanfaatkan oleh mereka yang memerlukannya.

Kata Kunci: kaunseling kesejahteraan psikologi, stress, etika, falsafah

INTRODUCTION

Stress is caused by different stressors such as academic, financial, health related or loss of close family member or friend. Stress is the bodies' reaction both neurologically and physiologically to adapt to the new condition (Harlina Halizah, Salam, Roslan, Hasan, Jin, MN Othman, 2014). It is an occurrence where individuals are unable to deal with pressure in a new environment or condition. The pressure comes in various forms such as varying physiological changes. It is basically caused by two things; the thought of anxiety and also how our body will react during the thought processes. This is one of the responses to an event known to many as 'fight or flight' as explained in www.stress.org.uk: 'During a stressful moment, our body's intelligence will autonomously take control by setting the changes that may bypass our logical deduction thinking. The preference always goes to the physical function that provides more strength to overcome an enemy or even fleeing.'

However, in a modern urbanised context, the ideology of stress relates not solely to life and death situation. Stress as defined

by Cohen, Kessler and Gordon (1995) as the process where environmental demands strain an organism's adaptive capacity resulting in psychological and biological demand that could place at risk for illness.

Factors that cause stress are identified as stressors. It occurs in every human; irrespective of different phases of life or in different states of economy. This is why we must all learn to handle stress since it comes in various shapes and degrees. Furthermore, having stress can lead to all kinds of psychosomatic illnesses as explained in the later part of the article.

A study on medical students in a public university in Malaysia found that academic and social related stressors contributed to severe and high stress in 84% and 49% of the respondents (Harlina Halizah et al., 2014). In an earlier study on 506 Malaysian undergraduates led by Khadijah (2013), it was found that 9.7 % of the respondents had severe and extremely severe depression, 29 % had severe and extremely severe anxiety and 5.1% had severe and extremely severe stress. Even though there was a low percentage of severe and extremely severe stress, this could be due to the escalation of stress to anxiety and then depression.

Hadi, Naing, Daud, Nurdin and Sulung (2009) in their study on stress among secondary school teachers in Malaysia found that the prevalence of stress was as high as 34%. Yet, in another study on 329 Malaysian government officers, the high level of stress is attributed to the immense role overload (Jasmani & Abdul Jumaat, 2011).

Razali (2008) has listed three categories pertaining to stress; environmental, psychological, and biological. Environmental stress revolves on assessing the environmental situations or experiences that are objectively related to substantial adaptive demands. Psychological stress on the other hand places emphasis on human's subjective evaluations of their ability to cope with demands given to them in various situations and experiences. Biological stress emphasises on the function of certain physiological systems in the body that are regulated by the psychological and physical demanding conditions.

Having listed the three classification of stress, it is quite complex to draw a correlation between stress and illness. The main reasoning is because each person has a different level of susceptibility to stress. This means if an event can cause illness in one, to another person it may not (Razali, 2008). Nevertheless, it is beneficial to examine the stress susceptibility factors.

SOME STRESS SUSCEPTIBILITY FACTORS

Elaborated below are some but not all of the factors that cause a person to have stress.

Genetic Vulnerability

Knorring (1982) mentioned that in recent decades, there are undisputed data in life events linking to depression. Life events recorded have tendencies to be relevant in the development of depression, and their pathogenic then is still poorly understood. Depression stems from stress that went untreated.

Coping Pattern

When one is coping with life events, coping is the process of expanding conscious effort in resolving personal and interpersonal problem, trying to learn and minimise stress through better toleration (Weiten & Lloyd, 2008). If one faces difficulties in coping with challenges, stress will prevail.

Personality

Every individual differs in their method of responding to problems and stressors. There will be people who were born with temper issues that place them to differing levels of tolerance to stress (Martin, 2015). Our reactions to a situation have a part in determining how stressful can a situation be to us. Such reaction is characterised in our importance and implications of the events and how we can effectively manage and cope with the events. Therefore, with varying factors, this could cause inevitable stress onto a person.

Financial Stress

For most working adults, one of the main contentions of stress is due to financial situation (Tng, 2015). During the 2008 global financial

crisis, it has shown how a financial turmoil in matured economies can trigger strong financial stress; notably in emerging markets. There were studies done previously to indicate financial crises and contagion indicates connections which financial stress does cascade down from the advanced to emerging markets. It shows that financial stress is inevitable in every working adult which plays an integral role in the webs of economics (Park & Mercado, 2013). In Malaysia presently, the financial stress imputed on working class adults are amplified further. Presented in Appendix A is the key economic data for Malaysia as of Financial Year 2016 (FY2016) from Malaysia Treasury (2016).

As observed for FY2015, there was a substantial reduction in national revenue but with a larger increment in development expenditure. This is a clear sign that the nation is running on a stronger degree of deficit for the nation hence indicating a slide in economic growth. Despite the optimism of the federal government in terms of maintain a healthy growth in Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Malaysians are beginning to feel the economic pinch. Festivities are toned down by reducing spending.

Economists are beginning to indicate that the majority of Malaysians are stuck in the middle income trap. This is a state where an individual is stuck in between the lower income and the higher income scale whereby they are unable to shift to other income scale.

The unemployment rate hovers around 3% which is still considered to be reasonable upon benchmarking with many other developing nations. However, in February 2016, the government reportedly would bring in 1.5 million foreign workers from Bangladesh and this is expected to increase by a small margin in the unemployment data.

With the implementation of Government Service Tax (GST) in April 2015 also has impacted on our national Consumer Price Index (CPI) due to the hike in prices. The impact of such changes did hurt the country's car sales to a certain extent.

The local ringgit currency has taken severe beatings where the currency has weaken at par with the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis

valuation. Added with the sharp drop in the crude oil price where it broke USD 30 per barrel, the country's main source of revenue through Petronas has been slashed to a point where Petronas announced that their capital expenditure would be slashed severely too. (REF)

With all these problems, it goes beyond reasonable doubt that these problems would definitely cause unavoidable stress due to the sudden rise with the cost of living. Although the federal government tried to cushion the impact through BRIM and other forms of acronyms, the truth is unavoidable.

IMPACT OF BUCKLING UNDER STRESS

Stress, as described by medical practitioners, is able to cause positive and negative effects. Although good effects may turn out due to this, however, the negative effects are more prevalent. The negative effects can be broken into two key aspects; internal effects and external effects. WebMD mentioned some of the symptoms of stress includes faster than normal heartbeat, headaches, stiff necks, backaches, rapid and short breathing, excessive perspiration and sweaty palms, and upset stomach.

If these go untreated, these symptoms will migrate to a more complicated problems such as exposure to immune diseases, increased heart related problems (which includes high blood pressure, arrhythmia, sclerosis and heart failure), muscular pains (notably in neck, shoulder, and lower back), higher probability of Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD), peptic ulcer, irritable bowel syndrome, weaker reproductivity caused by problems related to erection, pregnancy, and menstrual cycle, increased probability of asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary and increased probability of skin related diseases.

If the stress related reaction goes out of control, it will induce panic attacks. These attacks are sudden, intense fear that causes one to have shortness of breath. These people usually feel out of control as though they are having a heart attack. They usually happen with no clear cause but they can be triggered by high level of stress for an extended period.

If all of these left untreated; especially for chronic cases, it could drive a person to have no choice. This could possibly cause more severe destructions which revolve around the individual. For example, it could cause depression, continuous hallucination, anti-socialism which puts family at risk of breaking. The worst part is when an individual contemplates on suicide. This is the reason why it is essential for an individual to consider having counselling and guidance during such dark hours in life.

HOW CAN COUNSELLING HELP?

Under Akta Kaunselor 1998 (Akta 580), only registered counsellors with a valid certificate of practice are allowed to offer professional counselling services. The counsellors are required to have a fair, unbiased mind-set. Their theoretical knowledge, skills and techniques acquired during their professional training enable them to behave so. A good grasp on the counselling theories is the crucial thrust in helping clients as elaborated below:

- Counselling theory provides a framework for integrity between understanding, interpretation, and ultimately action. It is imperative that consistency and integrity are important to achieve goals in the best way.
- Counselling theory is somehow like a metaphor. The theory provides a general idea that helps to clarify our understanding and also lead us to similar conclusions in any situations. In other words, counselling theory allows the creation of knowledge.
- Counselling theory allows counsellors of different level to use a general idea. Some counsellors may rely on these theories to give a road and allow themselves to be effective to the one who seeks for counsel. These theories can be used to a higher level by facilitating their integration of self and external knowledge.
- Counselling theory is a precursor of new research. Through theories, it opens an avenue to test and conduct research. If researches were absent, we need to solely depend on clinical observations which may come to poor methods of intervention. This is why it is essential for one to have a fair share knowledge of counselling theories.

- Counselling theory is a mean of how human can rule over nature. To understand why one does something, one have to think through it realistically and thoroughly (Rousseau, 1968). If we do other than this, it will be a walk in darkness and it can be harmful to whom that seeks counsel.
- Counselling have to be immediate with the factors of uncertainty, varying complication and new types of problem. However, not all situation warrants a proper answer. Nonetheless, through counselling theory, we are able to draw upon answers based on the experiences of the past (Whitehead, 1916).

In short, Boy and Pine (1983) generalised six functions of counselling theories:

1. Help counsellors to find unity and relatedness in diversity of existence
2. Help counsellors to check relationships they tend to overlook
3. Help counsellors by giving them proper guidelines by which to work and helping them to evaluate their development as professionals
4. Help counsellors to focus on relevant information and tell them what to look out for
5. Help counsellors to assist clients in their behaviour modification, cognitions, emotional functioning, and interpersonal relationships
6. Help counsellors to evaluate both old and new approaches to the process of counselling.

PHILOSOPHIES IN COUNSELLING

There is no one perfect way when it comes to methods in counselling. One counsellor may approach different method to another over the same issue faced by an individual. Counselling is a journey of self-discovery (Goldsmith, 2016). That is why there may be various types of philosophies employed in the field of counselling.

It is through the avenue of counselling, the counsellor and individual work hand in hand to discover and explore deeper into the individual's issue. One important philosophy at hand is the

need of the self-awareness and the willingness to help and change the individual's life. One of the biggest issue faced by individual is related to happiness. The happiness stems from the ability to overcome or avoid all the said issues that plague us individually; especially Malaysians.

Through counselling, we are able to explore what are the hindrances to happiness. Among the prime examples of such hindrances could be old patterns that are not essential anymore, lacking of drive and fulfilment, self-judgement, or even negative behaviours that impede our happiness (Goldsmith, 2016). It is through counselling, we are able to assist in removing the said obstacles thus leading to a happier and more fulfilling life.

A counsellor must profess respect, genuine empathy, acceptance and unconditional positivity. Only when a counsellor has such values then only a true healing will occur. The counsellor assumes the position as a facilitator, and not as a direct healer. The counsellor is there not to provide solutions but only to guide them in the right direction to find answers. They must ensure also that the individuals must be able to explore themselves deep enough. This can be done by creating a safe place by the counsellor; whereby the counsellors must prepare a warm place for the healing process to take place.

When the counsellor does his/her job, there should not even be an iota of judgement. If judgement is present, the counsellor will have a certain degree of preconceived ideas and the exploration process will come to a complete halt. This is why a counsellor must be free of judgement too.

There are counsellors who use cognitive method when they counsel individuals. They would focus on reality therapy. It is where the counsellors would make the individuals realise about their choices and responsibility, yet in a loving and warm manner that shows care. Every counsellor's relationship with the clients should be based on the Rogerian principles of unconditional positive regards and empathy. From here only would a trusting relationship be formed; which is essential for counselling to start. Reality therapy is one of the preferred choices due to its directional and concrete approach

(Gladding, 2004). The progression is measurable and individuals are able to move forward easier.

TYPES OF COUNSELLING

Counselling are generally able to be segregated into four major categories; affective change, cognitive change, behavioural change, and social system change (Cormier & Hackney, 1993).

Affective Change

The main objective of this type of counselling is to help individuals express, identify feelings, and also to modify/accept/feeling states (Cormier & Hackney, 1993). Many of the individuals fail to express their emotions. At a higher level, some individuals come with emotional reactions, but flooded with their awareness and sensitive to feelings. These individuals will be responding emotionally but be able to turn out to emotions, confused or disoriented. Through counselling, we can unblock or develop expressive skills such as helping individuals to know what feeling is, affect focusing techniques, role reversal and many other methods.

Cognitive Change

The main objective is to lower emotional distress by changing erroneous thoughts, perceptions and beliefs (Beck, 1976). Cognitive counselling stresses the importance of self-control. Individuals are perceived by counsellors as direct agents of their own changes, rather than a helpless victim (Cormier & Hackney, 1993). Some methods used include but not exhaustive Ellis (1989) ABCDE analysis, thoughts suppression, thought postponement, therapeutic paradox, and cognitive restructuring.

Behavioural Change

The main objective of such counsel is to help individuals develop adaptive and supportive behaviours to different conditions. To do so, the counsellors have to help the individual eliminate behaviours that work against the outcome wanted. This involves teaching the individual such as live modelling, symbolic modelling, covert modelling, role playing and many other methods that suits such methods of counsel.

Systemic Change

Such methods of counsel are based on the idea that an individual's environment may catalyse and support one's dysfunctional cognitive, behavioural and affective responses. Such method is to change the individual's social environment hence, modifying the patterns of interrelationship that supports such responses. This includes changing communication patterns by role playing and negotiation, altering family structures by redefining boundaries and other form of methods that support such counsel.

PRACTICALITY IN COUNSELLING

As we had seen there are many theories in counselling. Nonetheless, which theories a counsellor could use will suit the individual? More importantly, we need to deduce how the counsellor can work with a consistent theory. The theory can be a textbook theory or personal theory stemmed from personal experience. Common sense dictates that a counsellor choice would originate from the conceptualisation of the problems, thus from the counsellor's preferred choice of theory. Nonetheless, if we look in the consolidative perspective, the choice will always be made, by relating intervention directly to the nature of the problem being addressed.

The issues faced by individuals are usually multi-variation. Issues like negativity, does not encompasses cognitive, but also affective and behavioural dimensions compiled with systemic dimension. Intervention at one of the dimension will affect undoubtedly other dimensions. Therefore, what strategy it may take for counsellors to undertake? A general guideline is that the individuals are most receptive when the strategy matches their experiences of the problem (Cormier & Hackney, 1993).

COUNSELLING ETHICS

Counselling sessions have to be given on an ethical basis. Otherwise, it will be purposeless. Many seek such sessions due to their troubles and vulnerability. They want to be sure that the counselling is to help them in getting a greater sense of self-control and wellbeing in their lives and such sessions are not being used to serve for other purposes.

Hence, it is imperative that the relationship between two parties must be ethical. Despite this clear line drawn, many individuals are not informed about such standards thus more likely to judge the ethical basis through assessing the personal integrity of the counsellor.

The term 'trust' is always involving a leap of faith into darkness, where information are lacking and ignorance included to place confidence in the counsellor. There are some who begin the process by disclosing minor issue before progressing to the real issues. Others, on the other hand, will directly delve into their problem due to the nature of its urgency. In any ways, the trust has to be formed. That is why, it is important that the counsellor's personal commitment in being ethical is of utmost importance. If trust is absent, no counsel can even start. Establishing a high level of trust in counselling is considered to be so fundamental that it is the primary principle in the constructions of counselling ethics (Bond, 2007). It is also the basis of the legal protection of confidences imparted in counselling in many jurisdictions.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, (BACP) given guidelines on ethics when counselling is given.

Being trustworthy

It is honouring the trust given to the counsellor. This is fundamental in understanding and resolving ethical issues. When the counsellors adhere to this, and acting in their means with those who trust them, able to meet what the individuals expect, and also restrict any form of disclosure of confidential information about the counsellor's clientele.

Autonomy

It emphasises on the individual's right to be independent. It enables the individual to develop their ability to be self-directing in all aspects of their lives. This will ensure accuracy in disseminating information, and emphasising in the value of voluntary participation.

Beneficence

A counsellor's objective is to ensure they promote the individual's wellbeing. Principle of beneficence means acting in the best interest

of the individual based on professional assessment. It linked to working directly to the counsellor's limits of competence and giving services on the basis of experience. This requires a systematic monitoring of practice and outcome with the best available means.

Non-maleficence

This refers to the commitment in preventing harm onto the individual. This includes avoiding any form of sexual, financial, emotional or other forms of exploitations. The counsellors have a professional responsibility to uphold to prevent any forms of damage to the integrity of the profession.

Justice

It is the essence of a fair and impartial treatment to all and providing fair services and counsel. The principle of justice demands of fairness and justness. The counsellors are to respect the individual's rights and dignity. It is the distribution of services that requires the ability to impartially determine the provision of services and counsels. A commitment to fairness requires the ability to appreciate differences between people and to be committed to equality of opportunity, and avoiding discrimination against people or groups contrary to their legitimate personal or social characteristics. Practitioners have a duty to strive to ensure a fair provision of counselling and psychotherapy services, accessible and appropriate to the needs of potential clients.

Self-respect

This means the ability to bond the counsellor's knowledge with the care for self. This principle implies that the counsellor will apply wisely the principles imputed to any individuals. It includes seeking counsel and therapy and other options for personal development as and when it is needed. There is an ethical responsibility to use supervision for appropriate personal and professional support and development. The principle of self-respect allows active engagement in life-enhancing activities and relationships that are independent of relationships in counselling.

BENEFITS OF UNDERGOING COUNSELLING

Counselling is a method that can be utilised to help others going through difficult times (Geldard & Geldard, 2012). It is a method sought after when they are unable to face the problem alone or when they require professional advice for strategies. McLeod (2007) defines counselling as a form of relationship initiated by the individual who needs help and a professional in counselling.

Through counselling, it gives a space for an individual to talk and share out difficult feelings. The counsellor would definitely support and honour your perspective where deemed possible. A counsellor hardly gives advice but will guide oneself in search of own solutions and understand the problem better. The National Health Service (NHS) listed down few benefits; although it is non-exhaustive on the benefits when one seeks help from counsellors. The possible benefits are:

- Coping with bereavement period: Certain individuals do face difficulties in accepting death occurring in family members. Due to this, these individuals are unable to function normally after a long period of time too and they have to seek help in overcoming and accepting that death is part and parcel of life.
- Coping with relationship friction: Certain individuals do face trouble in their relationship. Many instances where individuals who did not seek help tend to think of the worst. In such cases the term suicide has a high chance of playing in the individual's mind.
- Coping with redundancy and work-related stress: Certain individuals have to deal with troubles in work places and this may take a toll on them to a point where they may experience mental breakdowns.
- Helping in achieving ambitions: Certain individuals will have inhibitions to achieve what they want to achieve. Through counselling, the counsellor can assist the individual in search of their ambitions by helping them to search for their pathway.
- Helping to overcome depression: Depression is getting serious nowadays due to the onslaught of issues plaguing

individuals. Although different individuals have different level of tolerance in depression, it has to be made clear depression by itself is detrimental. This is the reason why counsellors must be able to assist the individual to avoid depression taking over their lives.

- Developing a greater understanding of other point of views: As much as a counsellor should support the individual in need, there are at times where tides do turn whereby the individual need to understand the other party's point of view. A counsellor will be a fair and unbiased judge to correct a wrong party if their points of views are flawed. This is to allow these individuals to be able to view everything objectively rather than selfishly.

Despite all of these benefits that stem out of counselling, it is essential to know that counselling may cause difficult and painful feelings. Nonetheless, through the help and support of counsellor, these pain and difficulties will eventually subside and mould the individuals to be someone better than before.

CONCLUSION

It is inevitable and undeniable that counselling help individuals through difficult times. As written in the earlier segment of this article, Malaysians do face difficulties and challenges in their own unique situations. Many of them may not be able to grapple with such challenges; especially when it is financially related. That is the reason why many may need to seek special help for them to overcome these challenges. Such help comes in the form of counselling either in the form of voluntary or referral basis.

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