

Emotion-Focused Coping of Former Drug-User Addiction Counselors in Dealing with Work Stress from the Perspective of Character Education

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Abstract

Addiction counselors with a history of drug abuse recovery hold a unique position because they assist clients in the rehabilitation process while also maintaining their own recovery. This study aims to examine the emotion-focused coping strategies used by former drug-user addiction counselors in dealing with work stress from the perspective of character education. This research used a qualitative approach with a case study design at Yayasan Sekar Mawar, West Bandung Regency, West Java. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation study. The main informants consisted of three addiction counselors with a history of drug abuse, while two supporting informants were involved to provide an institutional perspective. The findings show that addiction counselors experience work stress from various sources, including diverse client characteristics, family pressure, demands to be role models, monotonous work routines, and personal vulnerability in maintaining recovery. The dominant coping strategy used by the counselors is emotion-focused coping, particularly positive reappraisal, self-controlling, and distancing. From the perspective of Thomas Lickona's character education, these coping strategies reflect the formation of moral knowing through self-awareness and understanding of personal limits, moral feeling through emotional control and empathy, and moral action through the counselors emotion regulation among addiction counselors functions not only as a strategy for managing work stress but also as a process of character formation, including self-control, responsibility, reflection, and resilience in maintaining recovery.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Addiction counselors are helping professionals who apply various counseling methods to guide individuals in overcoming drug dependence and achieving a better quality of life and health (Sibagariang et al., 2024). In addiction treatment, the role of counselors does not only involve formally trained professionals, but also former drug users who have recovered and become wounded healers, namely individuals who use their personal experiences to support the recovery process of others with addiction problems (Straussner et al., 2018 ; Kusumastuti

et al., 2024). Addiction counselors with a history of drug abuse occupy a unique position. On the one hand, they assist clients who are struggling to recover from substance dependence. On the other hand, they are also individuals in recovery who must maintain their own recovery every day. This condition creates professional demands and personal responsibilities that occur simultaneously. At Yayasan Sekar Mawar, a drug rehabilitation institution under the Diocese of Bandung, the active addiction counselors are former drug users. The counselors assist clients individually and in groups. They also often experience work pressure, although they do not always identify it as “stress.” The pressures they experience include diverse client characteristics, pressure from clients’ families, demands to become role models, and monotonous routines, all of which become challenges for the counselors.

Work stress refers to physical and emotional responses that arise when job demands are perceived to exceed an individual’s abilities or available resources (NIOSH, 1999). Among addiction counselors, unmanaged work stress may increase the risk of emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue (Sanders, 2020; Cavaiola et al., 2022; Paulson et al., 2024) and may even increase the risk of relapse when self-care is not maintained (Festinger et al., 2001, as cited in Raudhoh & Krisnawati, 2018). Field findings confirm that the counselors at Yayasan Sekar Mawar are able to maintain their recovery despite professional pressure. This indicates that coping strategies play an important role in helping addiction counselors deal with work stress while also maintaining their personal recovery process.

Coping strategies can be understood as conscious efforts by individuals to regulate cognitive and behavioral aspects in responding to pressures that are perceived to exceed their personal capacity (Syahda et al., 2025). Previous studies show that individuals under pressure tend to use two forms of coping strategies, namely problem-focused coping (PFC), which is directed toward the source of the problem, and emotion-focused coping (EFC), which focuses on managing emotional responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In work contexts where sources of pressure are difficult to change directly, EFC tends to be used more dominantly (Kholisah & Majo, 2023; Fatima & Risnawaty, 2023). Its forms include a) positive reappraisal, which refers to reinterpreting a situation positively; b) accepting responsibility, which refers to acknowledging one’s responsibility for a problem; c) self-controlling, which refers to consciously managing emotions; d) distancing, which refers to creating emotional distance from the source of pressure; and e) escape avoidance, which refers to avoiding or escaping from the problem.

This form of emotional regulation is in line with Thomas Lickona’s concept of moral feeling, which refers to the character dimension related to an individual’s ability to feel, restrain, and direct moral impulses responsibly (Lickona, 1991). Lickona explains that good character does not only consist of knowledge of what is right (moral knowing), but also the ability to feel it (moral feeling) and actualize it in action (moral action). These three components are interrelated and serve as the basis for character formation. In the context of

addiction counselors, dealing with work stress can be understood not only as a psychological response, but also as a process of character formation. This process is reflected in how counselors understand their personal limits (moral knowing), manage emotions so that they do not explode or become overly involved (moral feeling), and remain professionally present for clients (moral action).

Although studies on coping among addiction counselors have been conducted, research that specifically focuses on emotion-focused coping and connects it with the framework of character education remains limited. Previous studies have mostly discussed coping in general, and have not fully explained how such strategies are formed through counselors' life experiences and recovery processes. Therefore, this article aims to examine the emotion-focused coping of former drug-user addiction counselors in dealing with work stress through the perspective of character education.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because the study aimed to understand in depth the experiences of former drug-user addiction counselors in managing work pressure, rather than measuring the phenomenon quantitatively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The case study design was used because the phenomenon under study occurred within a specific context (Yin, 2018). This research was conducted at Yayasan Sekar Mawar in West Bandung Regency, West Java, a drug rehabilitation institution where all addiction counselors have a history of drug abuse recovery.

Data were collected through three techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation study. In-depth interviews served as the main source of data because they allowed the researcher to explore the counselors' direct experiences in dealing with work pressure and the coping strategies they used. Observation was conducted to examine how counselors interacted with clients and the work environment. Meanwhile, documentation study was used to complement the data obtained from written sources available at the institution.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, not to represent a population, but to ensure that the data obtained were rich and relevant to the focus of the study (Merriam, 2009). The main informants consisted of three addiction counselors who were actively working at Yayasan Sekar Mawar, had a history of drug abuse, and were willing to share their experiences in depth. They were selected based on age, length of work experience, and recovery condition in order to obtain varied perspectives. In addition, two supporting informants were involved, namely one foundation staff member and one executive director, to provide an institutional perspective.

Data analysis was carried out through the processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings were then categorized using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984)

framework of emotion-focused coping and interpreted through Thomas Lickona's (1991) perspective of character education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1.1 Research Results

The study found that addiction counselors at Yayasan Sekar Mawar experienced work pressure from various sources. One source of pressure was the diverse characteristics of clients, ranging from manipulative and stubborn behavior to aggressive tendencies. In addition to client-related pressure, counselors also faced pressure from clients' families who were not aligned with the rehabilitation program, demands to consistently appear as role models, and monotonous routines caused by living in the rehabilitation center for up to twenty-four hours.

These pressures were not experienced in the same way by the three counselors. K1, as the most senior counselor, more often experienced pressure in the form of emotional exhaustion after years of directly dealing with various client characteristics and family-related issues. K2 experienced pressure in the form of thoughts that were difficult to stop, which sometimes affected sleep patterns. Meanwhile, K3, the youngest counselor who still lived in the rehabilitation center, faced a more vulnerable situation, such as prolonged boredom and occasional urges to use substances again, which could emerge at night when the rehabilitation center was quiet.

Despite facing these pressures, the three counselors showed the ability to recognize their own condition before it worsened. They were aware of their respective signs of stress, whether through physical sensations such as feeling unsteady, behavioral changes such as increased cigarette consumption, or emotional signs such as the emergence of boredom. Among the coping strategies identified, emotion-focused coping was the most dominant strategy used. Three forms were identified, namely positive reappraisal, self-controlling, and distancing.

- a) **Positive reappraisal** was found only in the first counselor, K1. K1 interpreted every work pressure as a test that would eventually pass, rather than as a threat. K1 was also accustomed to seeing clients, who often came from modest family backgrounds yet were still trapped in addiction, as reminders not to return to the past. This reinterpretation made pressure no longer feel merely like a burden, but rather as part of an ongoing process.
- b) **Self-controlling** was found in all three counselors, although it appeared in different ways. K1 managed emotions by choosing to laugh at situations when clients provoked anger rather than reacting emotionally. K1 also firmly separated household matters from work matters. K2 temporarily stopped thinking about personal problems once entering the rehabilitation center and only dealt with them after returning home. Meanwhile, K3 consciously restrained emotions in front of clients because K3 understood that they were no longer a client, but a counselor who had to maintain authority and integrity.
- c) **Distancing** was also found in all three counselors. K1 created emotional distance by considering irrelevant client stories as matters that did not need to be overthought,

while also physically taking personal time at home by sleeping or watching films. K2 distracted themselves by riding a motorcycle, playing games, or watching entertainment content when needing a break. K3, who lived in the rehabilitation center, chose to get fresh air outside the institution, sometimes simply sitting and enjoying the natural scenery.

It should be noted that the distancing practiced by the three counselors was temporary and was always followed by a return to work responsibilities. There was no indication that the distance they created led to complete avoidance of problems. This distinguishes it from escape avoidance, which in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework refers to a complete disconnection from the problem, including the risk of returning to substance use.

1.2 Discussion

The dominance of emotion-focused coping among the three counselors largely emerged from the sources of pressure they faced, such as client characteristics that were difficult to change, the demand to be a role model, and monotonous routines. When examined through Thomas Lickona's (1991) character education framework, these strategies reflect the operation of three character components within the counselors, namely moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action.

a) Moral Knowing

Lickona (1991) explains that moral knowing includes a person's ability to recognize the moral dimension of a situation (moral awareness), understand relevant values (knowing moral values), take the perspective of others (perspective-taking), engage in moral reasoning, make decisions, and understand oneself (self-knowledge). In the context of addiction counselors, moral knowing is most clearly reflected in their ability to recognize personal limits. The three counselors demonstrated awareness of their internal conditions, especially in recognizing when they began to feel pressured and in understanding that the work of an addiction counselor requires emotional stability. This awareness emerged through continuous reflection on their work experiences and their previous life experiences as former substance users. For the counselor with the longest work experience, self-knowledge was reflected in the ability to cognitively reinterpret pressure and use clients' experiences as a mirror for personal reflection. Perspective-taking was also evident in the way the counselors understood clients not merely as sources of pressure, but as individuals with backgrounds that required support and guidance.

b) Moral Feeling

Lickona (1991) emphasizes that knowing what is right is not enough. A person also needs to feel a commitment to goodness. Moral feeling includes conscience, self-esteem, empathy, loving the good, self-control, and humility. This is where the EFC practiced by the counselors finds its strongest relevance. Self-controlling as a coping strategy, from Lickona's perspective, represents self-control as a component of moral feeling. For K3, the youngest counselor who was still in the recovery process, restraining emotions in front of clients was a form of self-control that also helped protect against the risk of relapse. The positive reappraisal practiced by K1 can be interpreted as a tendency toward "loving the good" because work pressure was not understood as an obstacle, but as part

of maintaining commitment to recovery and client assistance. Meanwhile, functional distancing can be interpreted as a tendency toward humility, namely the awareness that not all client problems are within the counselor's control and that maintaining emotional distance is not a weakness, but a form of wisdom needed so that counselors can continue to be present without becoming emotionally drained. Empathy in this study also appeared in a unique form. The counselors had a deep understanding of clients' conditions because they had experienced similar situations in the past.

c) Moral Action

Lickona (1991) describes moral action as the result of the two previous components, which is manifested through competence, will, and habit. A person who already possesses moral knowledge and mature moral feeling still needs these three elements so that moral values can truly be realized in concrete action. The counselors' consistency in continuing to assist clients despite facing pressure reflects "will," namely the moral willingness to choose what is right. Their ability to manage emotions and create healthy distance has become a habit that is no longer entirely deliberate, but has become part of how they respond to difficult situations. Competence is reflected in the counselors' ability to choose EFC strategies that suit the situation, because not all pressures can be responded to in the same way. They know when to reinterpret a situation through positive reappraisal, when to restrain themselves through self-controlling, and when to create distance through distancing. The ability to choose an appropriate response is a moral competence that does not emerge instantly, but is shaped by experience, reflection, and the ongoing recovery process.

4. CONCLUSION

Former drug-user addiction counselors at Yayasan Sekar Mawar face work pressures that include diverse client characteristics, demands to become role models, monotonous routines, and personal vulnerability as individuals who must maintain their own recovery. In dealing with these conditions, the most dominant strategy used is emotion-focused coping, particularly positive reappraisal, self-controlling, and distancing. These three strategies do not emerge as spontaneous responses, but are shaped by work experience, recovery experience, and the counselors' awareness of their personal limits. When examined through Thomas Lickona's (1991) character education framework, the EFC practiced by the counselors reflects a process of character formation. This process is shown through self-awareness and self-knowledge as a form of moral knowing, the ability to manage emotions and maintain empathy as a form of moral feeling, and professional presence in assisting clients as a form of moral action. The findings indicate that emotional regulation among addiction counselors functions not only as a strategy for dealing with work stress, but also reflects character formation, including self-control, responsibility, self-reflection, and resilience in maintaining recovery. Therefore, rehabilitation institutions need to strengthen counselors' character through emotional support and continuous mentoring so that counselors can maintain self-stability and the quality of client assistance.

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