

Care for the Carers: Counselors' Coping Strategies in the New Normal

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Abstract

The impact of the global pandemic demanded a lot from various sectors, including the country's mental health workers, one of whom are the Guidance Counselors. This study aims to identify counselors' coping strategies on managing work stress during the pandemic, as well as their perceived relationship between how they cope and their profession. Using a descriptive design, the study made use of the Brief-COPE inventory to determine which coping style from either problem, emotion, and dysfunctional focused coping do the counselors regularly use. A question was also added to determine the perceived connection of coping strategies to their work. The findings show that while counselors generally use a problem-focused coping style, they also utilize a combination of emotion and problem-focused coping strategies, with dysfunctional coping strategies being the least used. Moreover, the counselors perceive that their work has some influence on the way they cope, which is through their: experiences and encounters from work and students/clients and application of skills from being a counselor; while it was also indicated by some counselors that their strategies can also be situation-specific. The results will serve as a basis to implement a wellness program that is aligned to the predominant coping strategies of the counselors that will not only encourage but also improve their abilities to cope.

Keywords: *BRIEF-Cope, counselors, problem-focused, emotion-focused, dysfunctional-focused*

Introduction

Taking care of oneself is something necessary but often forgotten by many. This statement can be highly true for the professionals who have selflessly and tirelessly provided their services in the midst of a global pandemic. Since the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak last 2020, the demand for the healthcare sector and different other public services has risen to the heights. With these high demands, the

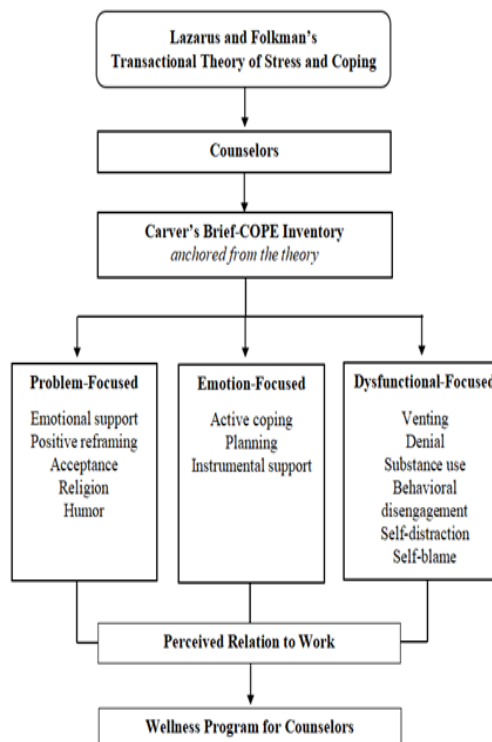
inevitable stress of the job becomes more likely.

One of the people that has also selflessly provided their services are the ones working in the field of mental health (e.g. psychologists, guidance counselors). Along with the increase of medical needs, mental health problems also went alarmingly high since the start of the pandemic. Studies from different countries like China, India and the UK reported a surge of mental health issues such as

depression, anxiety and self-harm since the outbreak (Gao J et al., 2020; Loiwal, 2020; Pieh et al., 2021). In the Philippines, a local study presented some Filipinos having “moderate to severe” anxiety due to COVID-19 concerns (Tee et al., 2020). On account of this alarming event, taking care of one’s mental health is needed more than ever. This is evident by the recent surge of calls in mental health hotlines in the Philippines (Chiu, 2021) and the Department of Education (DepEd) addressing the need for more guidance counselors in the country (Magsambol, 2020).

Guidance counselors, aside from being vital to the educational setting, are also considered essential mental health professionals (Pincus et.al, 2021), and their duties have increased since the pandemic (Arrieta et al.,2021). With that said, only a few existing studies tackle recent years through their lens. Recent studies about counselors focused more on their challenges and opportunities of providing their services online (Eckart and Neale-Mcfall, 2021; Klein, 2021, Pedroso et.al, 2022), and little to none about the counselor’s personal well-being. We often forget to ask the helpers of our community how they have been and what they have personally done to get by during these troubling times. Therefore, the researcher aims to determine the coping strategies among counselors of Sacred Heart School-Ateneo de Cebu and how these strategies relate to their field of work that is very timely with the recent events in the country.

Conceptual Framework



Theoretical Background

Stress can affect anyone (Anspaugh et al. 2003). In both recent and previous studies, it has shown that whatever race, age, and gender, people are affected by stress and its effects (Utsey, C. et al. 2002; Klaiber, P et al., 2021; Bekker & Boselie, 2002); whether if it’s in one’s physical or mental health (Shankar & Park, 2016). Although stress is something experienced by everyone, people do not experience it the same way. Studies would show that these can be due to the individual’s different circumstances or the individual’s vulnerability to the situation (Smelser & Baltes, 2001; Kemeny, 2003).

With different experiences of stress, people also react differently to it (Scott, 2020). Generally, individuals instinctively find ways to manage themselves and the stressful situation; in other words, people try to cope. Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping best described the relationship between the two concepts. The theory explains that the process of coping helps mediate the stressful person-environment transactions. This is because stress is defined as a relational concept, being a transaction between the individual and their environment; and coping as the behavioral and cognitive efforts to handle the demanding circumstances that the individual is experiencing.

Specifically, the theory discusses two types of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Cooper et. al (2006) formally categorized the strategies into three categories with its own subscales, adding dysfunctional coping strategy to the list. Problem-focused coping comprises active efforts to handle the stressful situations through resolving the underlying cause. This strategy includes Active coping, Instrumental Support, and Planning. Individuals usually use problem-focused coping when they feel that they can effectively address the root of the stressor (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). On the other hand, emotion-focused coping comprises regulative efforts to decrease the emotional effects, such as in one's feeling or response to the stressful experience. This strategy includes using Emotional Support, Positive Reframing, Acceptance, Religion, and Humor. In contrast to problem-focused strategy, individuals usually make use of emotion-focused coping when they feel like they have limited to no control over the stressor (Zakowski, et al. 2001). Some recent categories of coping have also been

introduced such as the dysfunctional-focused coping strategy, which are maladaptive strategies that do not help in reducing the stress that a person perceives (Carver 1997). One would make use of this strategy when they don't want to address the stressor at all through their physical or cognitive efforts to disengage from it (Hegarty & Buchanan, 2021). This strategy includes venting, denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, self-distraction and self-blame.

Statement of the Problem

The research study aims to determine the counselors' coping strategies to manage work stress during the pandemic. Specifically, the study is guided by the following questions:

1. What coping strategies do counselors of Sacred Heart School-Ateneo de Cebu (SHS-AdC) use in managing stress during these times?
2. To what extent are the coping strategies of counselors of Sacred Heart School-Ateneo de Cebu, more problem-focused, emotion-focused or dysfunctional focused?
3. What are the counselors' perceived relation of their coping strategies to their field of work?
4. What wellness program can be done for the counselors that are aligned with their coping strategies?

Review of Related Literature

When stress is experienced by everyone and in many different ways, we can't deny that part of that stress we experience, in some ways, stems from our jobs. Stress does exist in all professions, but studies have shown that some jobs are just likely to be more sensitive to stress than others; one of which are those who deal with human health (Eslami et. al, 2015).

When the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) happened, the need for the healthcare sector increased dramatically, as did the demand for more mental health experts. In the Philippines alone, the Department of Education (DepEd) publicly addressed the need for more guidance counselors in the country during the time of the pandemic (Magsambol, 2020). Along with the abundant studies regarding healthcare workers (Litam & Balkin, 2021), Guidance counselors also had some share of studies on how the pandemic affected their services, and how it led to different experiences of stress.

A recent study by Litam et al. (2021) stated that counselors who are providing their services during the (COVID-19) global pandemic are experiencing a higher level of stress and posttraumatic symptoms to an extent that it affects their professional quality of life. Some studies have already pointed out some common stressful experiences that the counselors have been facing even before the pandemic happened; such as burnout from increase of work experiences, countertransference management (Gutierrez & Mullen, 2016; Choi et al., 2014), unfavorable counseling experiences (Zeeck et al., 2012) and even compassion fatigue (Thompson et al., 2014). It is safe to say that these stressful experiences have likely increased when the pandemic happened; recent findings have already specified some new experiences

such as the lack of workplace flexibility, adjustment on the sudden change of workplace or medium to conduct their services, and the difficulty to form bonds with their clients in the virtual set-up (Eckart and Neale-Mcfall, 2021; Klein, 2021). Though it's not all negative, the counselors, along with other professionals experienced some inevitable stressful situations in the time of the pandemic. With these stressful experiences, it is certain that these individuals adapted some coping strategies to manage their circumstance.

Coping strategies have been comprehensively studied throughout the years and due to its complex nature, it has not always yielded consistent findings (García, F.E. et al., 2018). Some studies would compare which coping strategy is better to use (Herman & Tetrick, 2009) but it is important to know that coping is a process that can change over time and it is based on various contexts (Schoenmakers et al., 2015). As for instance, studies show that people with addiction would often utilize dysfunctional coping strategies like denial and blame as they have a harder time dealing with their emotions (UCLA, 2022; Fordyce, 2021); and how people living with HIV/AIDS use support groups, a problem focused coping strategy, to cope with their experiences of stigma and discrimination (Paudel & Baral, 2015).

Studies of coping strategies on individuals working in the healthcare sector also showed different outcomes. A study by Monteiro et al. (2018), indicated that caregivers would adapt to an emotion-focused strategy through their religion as it mitigates their feelings of care burden, anxiety, and symptoms of depression. Tsaras et al. (2018) did a cross-sectional study on mental health nurses that showed both problem and emotion focused strategies

contributed to less anxiety symptoms for the nurses. One study on counselors from Benoit et al. (2007) have shown that experiences of compassion fatigue or being overwhelmed with empathic engagement with client's suffering are best mitigated through consulting with colleagues, setting boundaries, and humor; which are a mix of both emotion and problem focused strategies.

In relation to this, research has supported that some type of balance or utilization of both problem and emotion focused coping can be efficient for an individual. People with chronic health problems (such as fertility problems) revealed that making use of both emotion and problem focused coping strategy is more efficient; as it not only helps in one's mental well-being but also improves one's physical health (McQueeney, D.A., 1997). Another study also indicated that using high levels of problem-focused coping as well as low levels of emotion-focused coping can help reduce the stressful effects of a negative work-life spillover or the transfer of negative moods and attitudes from one's work to family (Sirgy et al., 2020).

Generally, it is up to the individual to determine which type of coping strategy would best suit the particular situation they are in (Morin, 2021), but some studies have specifically indicated which strategies are most likely to be more effective. According to a study from the University of Kent (2011), positive reframing, acceptance and humor are the most effective coping strategies as it leads to more feeling of satisfaction for the individual. In general, the use of problem-focused strategies reportedly leads to a better well-being since it aims at solving the underlying problem and seeks to improve the situation directly (Brown et al. 2005; Gaudreau and Blondin 2004).

In this study, the researcher focuses on the coping strategies of SHS-AdC counselors to know more about their context in the time of the pandemic where demands from their services have heightened, and understand how their strategies connect to their profession. The central aim is to have an intervention program that can improve and encourage the ability of the counselors to cope in line with what they have already been doing; and because of the complex nature of coping strategies, the researcher also aims to identify how the counselors perceive their coping strategies in connection to their field of work.

Research Methodology

The research study utilized a Descriptive Design as it aims to determine the counselors' coping strategies and perceived connection to their work. The Sacred Heart School-Ateneo de Cebu (SHS-AdC) counselors of 2021-2022 are the respondents of the study. A total number of ten (10) counselors participated, who are respectively assigned in different school levels of the institution (Primary to Senior High School). The researcher upholds the ethical considerations and protects the anonymity of the respondents.

In determining the coping strategies of the counselors, the researcher used the Brief-COPE inventory, which is the abbreviated version of the COPE (Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced) inventory. This 28 item self-report questionnaire developed by Carver has been designed and validated to determine an extensive range of coping strategies. To be specific, the Brief-COPE has 14 scales, each of which determine the degree to which a respondent makes use of a specific coping strategy. These scales include: Active coping, Instrumental Support, and Planning,

which are all under problem-focused coping strategies. Other scales include using Emotional Support, Positive Reframing, Acceptance, Religion, and Humor, which are all emotion-focused; while venting, denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, self-distraction and self-blame are under the dysfunctional-focused coping strategies. A follow-up question at the end of the inventory was added for the respondents to answer and explain if they perceive a relationship of their coping strategies to their field of work. The inventory was edited from a 4-point to a 5-point likert scale for a much better range; and was administered online through the use of Google Forms.

Results and Discussion

The objective of the present study was to identify the counselors' coping strategies to manage work stress during the pandemic. Table 1 presents the criteria to determine the regularity of use for each strategy.

Table 1. Criteria to Determine Regularity of Use for Each Coping Strategy

Mean rating range	Usage/Interpretation
1.0-1.9	Never
2.0-2.9	Seldom
3.0-3.9	Sometimes
4.0-4.9	Often
5.0-5.9	A lot/Always

Based on the results gathered by the researcher and the data that was statistically treated, Table 2 shows that for emotion-focused coping, acceptance is the strategy often used by counselors, closely followed by positive reframing and use of emotional support; while humor is the least used strategy in the group. This infers that counselors of SHS-AdC would often manage their stress through acknowledging the situation as it is to avoid escalation of

distress; as they also often try seeing things in a more positive light and seek for external emotional support. The three leading strategies for emotion-focused coping are significantly aligned to some studies that have indicated the specific strategies to be most effective when used during stressful experiences. In a study by Holmes et al. (2020), having emotional support such as connecting and asking for understanding from one's family or peers was considered to be one of the most helpful coping strategies during the pandemic. Most importantly, a study from the University of Kent (2011) recommended that positive reframing and acceptance, compared to other coping strategies, are considered one of the most effective strategies to use as it leads to more feelings of satisfaction. This implies that the counselors are already on the right track when it comes to practicing healthy coping strategies.

Table 2. Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

Strategy	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Acceptance	4.30	0.59	Often
Positive Reframing	4.25	0.59	Often
Emotional Support	4.05	0.64	Often
Religion	3.85	0.82	Sometimes
Humor	2.60	1.10	Seldom

Table 3 reveals that all strategies under problem-focused coping are sometimes used by the counselors in SHS-AdC, but to varying degrees. Use of instrumental support has the highest mean in the group, which implies that to manage stress, the counselors would sometimes seek for assistance that provides to meet their tangible needs. Seeking external instrumental support such as consulting with colleagues on what to do was considered a strategy that is much helpful for counselors in a study by Benoit et al. (2007). Active coping and problem solving was not far off

from instrumental support, this means counselors would also try to be aware of the stressor and determine solutions to either address or reduce the negative consequences of it.

Table 3. Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

Strategy	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Instrumental Support	3.95	0.55	Sometimes
Active Coping	3.90	0.84	Sometimes
Planning	3.85	0.85	Sometimes

Table 4 shows that when it comes to dysfunctional coping, venting and self-distraction are sometimes used by the counselors while other strategies in the group are either seldom or never used. This implies that counselors would sometimes express their negative emotions in some way in an attempt to forget their stressful circumstance; along with that, they sometimes distract themselves from the stressful event through engaging in other pleasant activities. Just like any other dysfunctional strategies, research has shown that strategies like venting and self-distraction are considered to be short-term mood repairs (Dalebroux, 2008; Allen & Leary, 2010), as they are passive and don't address the underlying problem of the stressful situation. While strategies like venting and distraction do not help in the long run, it does serve some function, which is why it's not surprising that people like the counselors in the study sometimes use these strategies. Kross (2021) says that strategies like venting benefits oneself in terms of satisfying our emotional and social needs as long as people are mindful of the situation such as to whom they vent. Aside from that, Tull (2021) says that self-distraction can also help in regulating one's emotion at the moment, as long as the individual returns and addresses the negative feeling they were experiencing. As indicated from the studies,

the use of these strategies requires doing some certain conditions for it to be helpful for the individual; and consistently using them in every stressful experience might lead to negative consequences. Considering that the counselors just either sometimes, seldom and even never use these strategies, it can be safely said that the counselors of SHS-AdC practice a much healthier way of coping.

Table 4. Dysfunctional-Focused Coping Strategies

Strategy	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Venting	3.75	0.79	Sometimes
Self-distraction	3.65	1.00	Sometimes
Self-blame	2.10	1.24	Seldom
Behavioral Disengagement	1.90	0.99	Seldom
Denial	1.75	0.92	Seldom
Substance Use	1.00	0.00	Never

To identify which style of coping was common among the counselors of SHS-AdC, Table 5 reveals the overall mean (mean of means) for the three coping styles. It shows that to some varying degrees, the counselors of SHS-AdC use the three styles of coping. The results reveal that problem-focused was a bit more likely used by the counselors. This implies that the counselors of SHS-AdC are most likely to manage their stress through resolving the underlying cause of the situation. It is notable that using problem-focused strategies is significantly better since studies show that it leads to better well-being (Brown et al. 2005; Gaudreau and Blondin 2004). Although it can also be clearly seen in the results that problem focused and emotion focused are not that significantly different or apart with their mean of means scores. This would imply that, aside from using problem focused strategies, they also utilize regulative efforts in response to their stressful experience. This result is highly favorable as studies have shown that rather than exclusively relying on one coping style,

using both problem and emotion focused strategies can be very efficient for the individual as it can lead to less experience of psychological costs (Sirgy et al., 2020; McQueeney, D.A., 1997; Cohen et al,1986). Dysfunctional coping style, in comparison to the difference between problem and emotion focused, is considerably least used by the counselors. This result is encouraging since the use of this coping style entails that the individual won't address or disengage from the stressor and this can lead to negative consequences in the future as the strategy just acts as a buffer.

Table 5. Popular Coping Style Among Counselors of SHS-AdC

Coping Style	Mean of means scores	Standard deviation
Problem-focused	3.90	0.49
Emotion-focused	3.81	0.49
Dysfunctional-focused	2.36	0.65

Along with the results obtained from the Brief-COPE Inventory, the researcher also seeks to identify the counselor's perceived connection of the current coping strategies they are practicing to their field of work. The researcher observed that the findings supplement the existing body of research on the complexity of coping strategies. These were categorized into three themes:

A. Learning through Experiences and Encounters from Work and Students/Clients

Most of the counselors' response falls under the notion that their learning experience of being a counselor had some influence on the way they cope. Considering the intimate and emotional nature of counseling (Gutierrez & Mullen, 2016), it's no surprise that the counselors are able to learn and practice healthy coping strategies because of their encounters in handling their clients and general experiences at work. One

counselor even indicated that their way of coping became better because of these experiences. The following excerpts present this theme:

“Yes. Working as a counselor is learning through the experience itself. In wanting to help the client, I try to check with myself which strategies or techniques are effective and add them as recommendations to the clients. In turn, the insights from the clients also help me know which can also be effective for me. Through this exchange of insight with clients, learning by experience and application, as well as consulting with other counselors, I can say that how I cope now is different from before and it is actually better.”

“Yes, they are connected because as counselors we teach our students coping strategies and we learn which ones are effective for us as well.”

“Yes, because I am also learning from my encounters with different people and situations.”

“I've been teaching students this and that especially about having good mental health, so I'm also learning for myself.”

“Yes, because through counseling, I also learn things or ways on how people deal with their problems, at the same time figure it out if it is right for them or not.”

“Yes. As a counselor, I am in a unique position to assist people in handling difficult situations in the most positive and productive way possible. As they seek assistance, my role is to aid them in learning how to deal with issues on their own by becoming more self-sufficient. I approach my own problems in the same manner. I look for assistance from others. I try to be as

honest as I possibly can. Then I'll aim to get back on my feet as soon as humanly possible."

B. Application of Skills from being a Counselor

In connection to the previous theme, some of the counselors specifically indicated how applying their skills as counselors such as being resilient, a good listener, and just having sufficient knowledge of the job helped them learn and practice some coping strategies that best suits them. Presented below are excerpts from the respondents' questionnaire:

"Yes, because the very core of our profession as counselors is to listen to people. With this, I learned various ways on how people cope with everything that has happened. I learned vicariously from their stories and it has influenced my mindset and the way I lived. It helped me acquire values, practices, beliefs and principles so I may be able to cope and live healthily."

"Yes. As a counselor, I am expected to be resilient and be able to manage my time despite the heavy demands and workload. For me to be effective and productive, I also try to apply the coping strategies needed."

"Yes. My profession helps me as I apply the knowledge and skills I learned and developed from doing my job every day."

C. Situation-specific

One of the counselors highlighted the idea that though being a counselor has its advantage in knowing what coping strategy to use, some specific stressful situations can still be hard to handle. One counselor also indicated that their coping strategies are not

solely connected to being a counselor as they have overcome previous stressful circumstances before being in the counseling field. The participants conveyed this theme by saying:

"It really depends on the severity of the situation encountered. There are matters that are easier to deal with, thus being a counselor really is an advantage. However, matters such as families or sickness and the like may be harder to deal with."

"...I have been facing a lot of challenges prior to being a counselor and I can say that I was able to make it through. I think I was able to cope because of the supportive and loving people around me and the faithful and living God that I serve who gave me the strength to endure all the hardships life throws at me."

These ideas align with the studies on the situation-specific effects of coping strategies, on how certain strategies that might have worked for an individual in one circumstance won't necessarily take effect on other stressful situations (Lee-Baggley et al. 2005; Elfering et al. 2005). It is also important to know that even though the counselors are in a helping profession, where they can be expected to be more resilient and equipped with the knowledge and skills to handle difficult times, it does not mean that they are unsusceptible to stress and its effects; studies have even shown that they are even more susceptible to stress and there is a need to address this ongoing concern (Gutierrez & Mullen, 2016; Litam et al., 2021).

Summary of Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

The results reveal that of the three main coping styles, the counselors of Sacred

Heart School-Ateneo de Cebu are more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies in managing stress while dysfunctional strategies were the least used. However, results also show that the counselors utilize both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies to some varied degrees. Which implies that they practice emotion regulation and at the same time they address the underlying problem of the situation. Out of the fourteen (14) strategies presented in the study, acceptance and use of instrumental support were the predominant strategies for emotion-focused and problem-focused coping styles respectively. While counselors would also sometimes do some venting and self-distraction for dysfunctional coping styles.

It was also evident by the counselors' responses that in some ways, their profession had an influence on the way they cope, specifically in knowing what's the best and suitable coping strategy to use when experiencing stressful situations. These are influenced through their (1) Experiences and Encounters from Work and Students/Clients and (2) Application of Skills from being a Counselor; while it was also indicated by some counselors that their strategies can also be (3) Situation-specific.

Conclusion

Research has repeatedly emphasized the complexity of coping strategies (García, F.E. et al., 2018; Herman & Tetrick, 2009) and this has been observed through the findings of this study. To manage the stress experienced by the counselors, especially during the time of the pandemic, the counselors do not solely or dominantly focus on one coping style. They fortunately practice some healthy coping strategies as evident from their utilization of both problem and emotion focused coping. In

some degree, this practice is a result of their experiences and learnings from their profession and their learned skills as counselors.

Recommendations

Even though the findings show that the counselors are on the right track when it comes to practicing healthy coping strategies, it does not mean they will be unsusceptible to stress and its harmful effects. It is therefore recommended to implement a wellness program for the counselors that will not only encourage but also improve their abilities to cope in stressful situations. This program shall be aligned to the predominant coping strategies of the counselors. In the use of problem-focused strategies like instrumental support, active coping and planning, the counselors can continue doing their professional conversations, especially in addressing some problems in their working environment, if there are any. With their use of acceptance, positive reframing and emotional support, these can be practiced and enhanced through meditations, support groups, and exercises targeted to them as helping professionals. Lastly, since the counselors would also sometimes use dysfunctional coping strategies like venting and self-distraction, it is important to teach them appropriate or healthier ways in using these types of strategies through some webinars/seminars.

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