

## Burnout among Secondary School Counselors in Malaysia: What are the Preferred Coping Strategies?

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### Abstract

This study aims to measure the relationship between coping strategies and burnout among 75 school counselors in secondary schools in one district in Malaysia. There are three types of coping strategies, namely problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. In this quantitative survey research, coping strategies were assessed by the Coping Orientation to Problem Experienced Inventory (Brief-COPE) and the Counselor Burnout Inventory (CBI) was used to measure the counselor's burnout. Results indicate that most school counselors adopt problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping when dealing with burnout. However, based on Pearson correlation analysis, only problem-focused coping has a significant negative correlation with burnout, while other sub-scales like emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping showed no significant correlation with burnout. Multiple linear regression was used to confirm that problem-focused coping is the most important predictor of burnout reduction. It accounts for 6.4% of the total variance. It has been concluded that most school counselors are able to use coping strategies in addressing burnout. Besides that, school counselors are encouraged to monitor the symptoms of burnout regularly due to the challenges they face in their daily tasks. Other suggestions and future research are also being discussed by the researchers.

**Keywords:** Coping Strategies, Burnout, School Counselor, Malaysia

### Introduction

The profession of school counselor today is a daunting profession as counselors do not only have to deal with their main job scopes, but they are also responsible for other accompanying tasks assigned to them. With this pressure getting worse, school counsellors are starting to feel like their job is not fun, rewarding, or satisfying at all. Some studies indicate school counselors are assigned to non-counseling related duties, have large caseloads, have multiple job responsibilities, and lack administrative support and understanding of the school counselor's role, which impacts the school counselor's ability to fully implement the counseling program (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Fye et al., 2018; Holman et al., 2018; Huat et al.,

2018). In addition, school counselors face overwhelming expectations from administrators, students, and their families. (Karatas & Kaya, 2015). Heavy workloads have caused school counselors to experience burnout. School counselors are at a greater risk of experiencing burnout even compared to other professions that require a high demand for empathy because of the multiple job demands, role ambiguity (Kim & Lambie, 2018), and large caseloads (Moyer, 2011). Studies indicate that a high level of burnout can lead to ineffective student services and a decrease in the counselor's capacity for empathy (Camelford et al., 2017). Burnout is the lack of motivation that is caused by a failure to produce desired results and is usually described as physical, emotional, or motivational exhaustion. It is known to cause people to have a negative self-concept and a negative attitude towards others, work, and life (Freudenberger, 1974; Garcia et al., 2017; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). According to Lee et al. (2007), burnout is defined as the inability to appropriately perform clinical tasks due to personal discouragement, apathy toward stress, and emotional or physical exhaustion.

Increased levels of burnout may lead to ineffective service delivery, depression, physical ailments, and anxiety (Kim & Lambie, 2018), all of which are likely to have negative impacts on the students as clients. School counselors' contributions to the field of education are important, as they play a pivotal role in students' academic, social, personal, and career development (Ernst et al., 2017). Burnout is a problem that professional school counselors experience (Bardhoshi et al., 2014). Research has shown some additional variables that deter professional school counselors from performing these duties, including case overload, low organizational support, low work satisfaction, and lack of training (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Schiele et al., 2014). Consequently, a coping strategy is required to counter the symptoms of burnout among school counselors. There are many cognitive and behavioral ways to deal with both internal and external pressures.

Coping processes are defined as the cognitive and behavioral processes used to manage stressful situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). There are several coping processes, including problem-focused coping, active-emotional coping, and avoidant-emotional coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Problem-focused coping is defined as an action-oriented approach to stress in which one believes the stressors are controllable by personal action (Lazarus, 1993). Active-emotional coping is an adaptive response to unmanageable stressors, and avoidant-emotional coping is described as a maladaptive response to those stressors (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Moreover, adaptive perfectionists experienced less stress and burnout and reported higher levels of problem-focused coping. Overall, for school counseling professionals, emotional-focused coping is positively related to burnout (Wilkerson, 2009). Therefore, school counselors need to be aware of the situations that can make them feel burned out and find ways to cope with them.

Researchers have described a positive relationship between stress and burnout among school counselors (Mullen et al., 2018; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). Specifically, higher levels of stress and burnout were related to lower levels of job satisfaction and delivery of direct student services (Mullen et al., 2018; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). Perceived stress is theorized as an individual's ability to appraise a threatening or challenging event in relation to the availability of coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Among school counselors, Fye et al (2018) studied the relationship between perfectionism, burnout, stress, and coping. Thus, the researcher believes that studies on burnout and coping strategies must be conducted, as work-related stress can be alleviated if the work environment is effectively managed.

### Research Objectives

This study measures the relationship and influence of coping strategies on burnout among school counselors. The study objectives have been formulated as follows:

1. To identify the level of three coping strategies which are problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping.
2. To measure the relationship between coping strategies (problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping) and burnout.
3. To identify which coping strategies (problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping) have the most effect on burnout.

### Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey approach, and questionnaires were used to collect data. Seventy-five school counselors from secondary schools in a Malaysian district were randomly selected as respondents. The Coping Orientation to Problem Experienced Inventory (Brief-COPE) (Carver et al., 1989) was used to explore respondents' coping strategies, and data regarding burnout was measured by the Counselor Burnout Inventory (CBI), developed by (Lee et al., 2010).

### Findings

Seventy-five school counselors have responded to the distributed questionnaire, comprised of 21 (28%) male respondents and 54 (72.0%) female respondents. According to the descriptive analysis, 56 respondents (74.7%) reported using problem-focused coping at a high level, while 19 respondents (25.3%) used the same coping strategy moderately. For the emotion-focused coping strategy, all respondents (100%) applied this strategy at a high level. However, when it comes to avoidant coping, respondents indicated that they use it at a low level (72.0%) to a moderate level (28.0%). In terms of burnout among counselors, 58 respondents (77.3%) reported a low level of burnout, while 17 respondents (22.7%) reported moderate burnout. Details for descriptive analysis can be referred to in Table 1.

Table 1

*The level of coping strategy and burnout*

Level	Coping Strategy Subscale			Burnout
	Problem-Focused Coping	Emotion-Focused Coping	Avoidant Coping	
Low	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	54 (72.0%)	58 (77.3%)
Moderate	19 (25.3%)	0 (0%)	21 (28%)	17 (22.7%)
High	56 (74.7%)	75 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	75 (100%)	75 (100%)	75 (100%)	75 (100%)

Problem-focused coping has a significant negative correlation with burnout ( $r = -.252, p = 0.029$ ), whereas emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping do not show a significant correlation with burnout ( $r = -0.082, p > .05$  and  $r = 0.162, p > .05$ ). Following that, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine which coping strategy had the most

significant impact on burnout. The results indicate that problem-focused coping is the most significant factor in explaining burnout differences among respondents ( $\beta = -0.238$ ,  $t = -2.22$ , and  $p = 0.029$ ). Burnout will decrease by 0.238 units for every one unit increase in problem-focused coping. Therefore, if counselors use problem-focused coping often enough, it will probably help them feel much less burned out. Results for correlation analysis can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

*Correlation between Brief-COPE subscales and school counselors' burnout*

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Problem-Focused Coping	Counselors' Burnout	-0.252	0.029*
Emotion-Focused Coping		-0.082	0.486
Avoidant Coping		0.162	0.166

\*significant at  $\alpha = .05$

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The main findings of this study show that respondents prefer to use a problem-focused coping approach when dealing with burnout. This approach is oriented towards active action to control stressful situations. In fact, individuals who apply this coping approach often plan their actions and reframe their thoughts to be more positive. Moreover, an individual applying this method of dealing with burnout also demonstrates mental fortitude and problem-solving skills. Therefore, problem-focused coping corresponds with the daily responsibilities of a school counselor, who must manage administrative tasks in addition to counseling sessions with a variety of clients facing a variety of issues and obstacles. If the counselor can't deal with burnout well, he could hurt the client because he won't be able to focus or care about them.

A high score for emotion-focused coping indicates coping strategies that aim to regulate emotions associated with stressful situations. High or low scores are not uniformly associated with psychological health or illness but can be used to inform a wider formulation of the respondent's coping styles. A high score for problem-focused coping indicates coping strategies that aim to regulate emotions associated with stressful situations. High or low scores are not uniformly associated with psychological health or ill health but can be used to inform a wider formulation of the respondent's coping styles. Moderate and low scores for avoidant coping indicate that very few were making physical or cognitive efforts to disengage from the stressor.

The results of the study also show that the burnout level of school counselors is low to moderate. This shows that they can overcome burnouts caused by exhaustion (emotional and physical fatigue), incompetence (internal beliefs about counselor competence), a negative work environment (counselors' attitudes and beliefs about the work environment), devaluing clients (lack of emotional connection and empathy toward clients), and a decline in personal life (effects of work on personal life).

The Pearson correlation analysis shows that only problem-focused coping has a significant correlation with burnout, whereas other subscales of coping strategy, namely emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping, do not have any significant correlation with

burnout. The study results show that the coping strategy problem-focused coping practiced by school counselors can reduce burnout. Next, the multiple regression analysis is done and shows that only problem-focused coping is the main predictor for burnout. This indicates that when the problem-focused coping is high, the burnout will be mitigated.

Preventing and reducing school counselors' feelings of burnout is important to ensure counselors' ability to provide ethical and effective services to their stakeholders. Failure to address work-related stress in school counselors may cause a reduced quality of their service and increased counselor attrition from the profession. Although more investigations examining burnout in school counselors are warranted, this manuscript offers increased insight into this significant job-related psychological phenomenon. Therefore, it may be helpful for school counselors and supervisors to identify and understand the dimensions of burnout experienced and their relationships with individual and organizational factors. By using the instruments from this study, school counselors can identify the contributions of individual and organizational factors to their burnout scores. This will also enable school administrators and other significant parties to understand the relationships between coping strategies and counselors' burnout.

Furthermore, intervention programs to prevent and intervene with school counselors' burnout and occupational stress at the individual and organizational levels are warranted. The efforts to prevent burnout may lead to school counselors providing better quality of services, benefiting both the counselors and the students they serve. Our study indicated that school counselors' responsibilities, such as non-counseling duties and dealing with large caseloads, hindered counselors from maintaining their wellness. Additionally, experiencing role conflict and employing too many emotion-oriented coping skills will potentially increase their feelings of burnout. Therefore, providers of counseling programs need to incorporate into their curriculum the characteristics of their future work environment that may involve potential risk factors for burnout. Also, school counselors may be less likely to experience burnout if they come up with their own strategies and practice useful skills like task-oriented coping skills.

There are various interventions that can help counselors deal with burnout. This intervention includes cognitive behavioral training, psychosocial skill training, and recreational music making. Other interventions used to reduce burnout among school counselors are cognitive behavioral techniques, management skill training, and social support. Krasner and colleagues (2009) reported the effectiveness of their continuing medical education program for physicians to reduce burnout, which involves mindfulness, self-awareness, and communication skills. Educating on mindfulness strategies, self-awareness, and communication skills may also be helpful for school counselors. Providing a supportive environment and acknowledging school counselors' work may help them increase their sense of matter in their workplace. Thus, it is very crucial for school counselors to focus on their own self-care and practice healthy work culture to avoid being burned out.

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