

The Support System and Conflict Management Elements among Drug Abused Clients in Recovery Programs: A Qualitative Inquiry via Group Counseling

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Abstract

The issue of drug abuse is a global concern and is also a major issue in Malaysia. Individuals involved in drug-related problems experience disturbances in terms of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects. This study aims to explore the support system and conflict management of supervised clients in treatment and recovery programs through a group counseling approach. There are 5 respondents involved in this study, consisting of supervised clients undergoing treatment and recovery programs at the National Anti-Drug Agency in the Jelebu district. The study objectives were achieved through open-ended interview questions conducted in psychoeducational group counseling sessions. The findings of this study were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of this study indicate that respondents have a clear understanding of the support system and agree that the support system plays a significant role in aiding their recovery. Additionally, there is an understanding of conflict management, specifically the conflicts they face during the recovery process. Respondents understand that conflicts are a part of life, whether for normal individuals or recovery fighters like themselves. It is recommended that guidance and counseling groups in addressing drug addiction issues employ various modules or approaches to facilitate assisting clients in the recovery process.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Drug Abuse, Group Counseling, Support System

Introduction

The issue of drug abuse in Malaysia is not a new problem. This issue has spread and escalated, affecting various age groups, including the elderly, adults, teenagers, and even children, who have become victims of this drug abuse problem. Based on reports from the 2020 National Anti-Drug Agency's Information Handbook, the statistical trend of drug addiction by age

category starting from the year 2016 to 2020 revealed that teenagers as young as 13 years old have started to become entangled in the issue of drug abuse.

The victims of drug abuse are seen to become increasingly aggressive as they come under the influence of drugs. This is attributed to the existence of various types of drugs, including synthetic drugs. According to the statistical trend report of drug addicts according to the types of drugs, it is found that synthetic drugs are the most widely used at present, and their numbers are increasing from year to year (National Anti-Drug Agency, 2020). Furthermore, the trend of synthetic or ATS drug abuse has a negative impact on individuals, especially leading to mental disorders and an increase in criminal behavior if left unchecked. This type of drug has an effect on a person's brain, disrupting their overall functioning. Sadiron (2020) mentioned that drug addiction is a type of disease that involves changes in brain structure, is chronic, recurring, and leads to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional changes.

Clearly, it can be seen that individuals involved in drug abuse issues will undergo changes in various aspects of their lives. In order to assist those involved in returning to functioning as normal individuals, various modules or activities have been introduced by the National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK). AADK has introduced various activities and modules in an effort to help clients participating in recovery programs to gain awareness and reintegrate into society. Based on the modules introduced by AADK, there are guidance and counseling modules offered both individually and in group settings. Guidance and counseling is a systematic process aimed at assisting individuals in recognizing themselves and developing rational thinking for making changes without the influence of the counselor. The counseling process is highly systematic and has specific goals related to the discussed issues. Mahfar et al. (2017) stated that counseling aims to aid individuals in problem-solving, providing a clearer understanding of desired life outcomes, making positive changes to achieve goals, and resolving issues more effectively.

It can be observed here that guidance and counseling play a significant role in assisting individuals involved in drug addiction issues. Each individual involved in drug abuse surely has underlying causes or primary factors that led them to become trapped in drug-related problems. The approach of guidance and counseling can help them unravel and gain rational insight into the main issues they face, which ultimately lead them into drug-related problems. Furthermore, the approach of guidance and counseling sessions can also aid them in recovering by helping them rediscover themselves, identifying the root causes of their problems, and clearly recognizing triggers within themselves. According to Ibrahim et al. (2020), in their study, they found that 92.7 percent of respondents agreed and strongly agreed that guidance and counseling help them solve problems, guide them in maintaining recovery, assist them in planning their lives, and provide motivation to start a new life. These findings indicate the significant role of guidance and counseling in aiding individuals involved in drug addiction issues to recover.

Guidance and counseling do not only focus on individual guidance and counseling. Group guidance and counseling as well as family counseling also need to be emphasized. It is highly likely that the issues faced by those involved are family-related and require resolution together with the family. As claimed by Zainuddin, Wan Sulaiman and Sedan (2021), individuals struggling with drug addiction greatly need the support of their family members. They further emphasize that resilience and self-confidence are easily lost within addicts, making family support crucial in strengthening their resilience throughout the recovery process. Moreover, Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2002), as cited in Zainuddin, Wan Sulaiman and Sedan (2021), state that family counseling is a therapeutic technique aimed at exploring

and attempting to change current emotional problems that are interrelated within a family by helping family members alter dysfunctional interaction patterns within the family system.

Research Background

Success for someone who has previously been involved in drug addiction issues is achieved when they manage to maintain recovery and avoid relapse. This success is influenced by various factors that aid clients in staying on the path of recovery, including the support from their surroundings and their own inner strength. To empower clients, it is crucial for them to possess a high level of skills and knowledge. A comprehensive and engaging module plays an important role in building their inner strength and empowering them with effective coping skills.

In conjunction with the study conducted by Idris, Fuziah and Mariamdarani (2020), it was emphasized that intervention modules provided in treatment programs should address aspects such as developing cognitive processes, behaviors, perceptions, self-esteem improvement, peer influences, and family support. This viewpoint is also supported by Noor & Kamarudin (2015) in her study on drug craving or addiction, in which she suggested that the addiction counselors to further enhance and emphasize the aspect of self-help principles in drug recovery modules. This way, clients can cultivate a strong fighting spirit and a desire for progress in their lives.

Furthermore, the study conducted by Said et al. (2021) using the approach of group and individual counseling sessions to identify the main factors contributing to clients' relapse found that weaknesses in their religious beliefs, which were too fragile, and lack of family support for the recovery process were significant factors. This implies that these factors can only be addressed effectively through group guidance and counseling sessions. In addition, low self-esteem is also a contributing factor to the recovery process Noor & Kamarudin (2015). It is possible that factors such as educational and occupational backgrounds contribute to low self-esteem, which in turn is related to the need for support from the community. Therefore, boosting the self-esteem of drug users or addicts is crucial in helping them break free from addiction.

Concomitantly, the suggestions and recommendations from previous studies inspired this study to intend to implement group guidance and counseling modules using specific objectives. In conventional group guidance and counseling sessions that mainly involve group discussions, it is observed that clients find them less engaging. Clients easily become bored and reluctant to share their stories when asked or prompted to do so. Group sessions with limited sharing are considered unsuccessful and challenging to achieve objectives. To assist officers at AADK in exploring and identifying client issues and problems more effectively, several suitable modules or activities can be implemented in group guidance and counseling sessions. In each module conducted during each session, distinct objectives will be incorporated to help clients acquire problem-solving skills, enhance their cognitive abilities, and build self-esteem, ensuring they are less susceptible to relapse and remain committed to their recovery journey. Thus, the two main objectives of this study were to:

1. explore the clients' support system in the recovery process
2. explore the clients' conflict management elements in the recovery process

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research design through the method of interviews. According to Piaw (2021), interview is a method of collecting information conducted orally, and the responses are recorded in writing, audio recordings, video recordings, or other electronic media by the researcher. In this study, the unstructured interview method was employed because the interviewer will formulate and adapt questions based on the objectives and responses of the study subjects during the course of the interview; hence, this method is deemed appropriate for this study.

This study involved five clients under the supervision of the National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK) under Section 6(1)(a) and 6(1)(b) of the Drug Addict Treatment and Rehabilitation Act 1983 and Section 38(B) of the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952. All these subjects will be randomly selected from those undergoing recovery programs at the National Anti-Drug Agency, Jelebu, Negeri Sembilan.

The study was conducted at the agency whereby the respondents were interviewed in group counseling sessions. Four sessions were conducted according to the planned modules. Thematic analysis was employed as the data analysis procedure for this study. The analysis process involves transcription, coding, comparison, and discussion of findings (Bongsu & Amat, 2021). The obtained information was categorized into several themes based on the objectives of the study. The themes formed during the interview sessions, in alignment with the study objectives of exploring the support system among clients in the recovery process and understanding how clients manage conflicts in the recovery process was then utilized to generate the discussion of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate two main themes based on the study objectives: (1) the importance of a support system in the recovery process, and (2) the significance of conflict resolution skills during the recovery process.

Theme 1: The Importance of Support System in the Recovery Process

Through interviews and group discussions, participants gained a clear understanding of support systems, and they unanimously agreed that support systems play a crucial role in aiding their recovery. Three sub-themes emerged from the interview results as follow:

- a. The Impact of Drug Addiction on Support System – The study participants agree that when they are in the world of addiction, they do not need support from anyone and do not care about those around them. Their main goal is to satisfy their own desires, as reflected in their statements:

"I used to be just a teenager who was too obsessed with social life." (R1)

"Back then, I used to hang out at the spot a lot, engage in criminal activities, and my life was very uncertain." (R2)

"My life was not well-managed. I didn't commit to work, myself, and my family." (R3)

"I used to live in a state of intoxication and was disliked by society." (R4)

"I used to live in a neglected and terrible state. I didn't mix with society at all, and even my family hated me." (R5)

- b. Family Support – According to the study participants, family support is highly crucial in continuing the recovery process. They expressed that even though it might seem like their families disliked them during their addiction phase, their families never abandoned them. They mentioned being grateful that during the recovery period, their families are consistently by their side. The following are statements from the study participants regarding family support:

"I want to apologize to both of my parents for all the mistakes I've made. I am grateful that I am still given the chance to experience the love of my mother and father." (R1)

"I truly appreciate the sacrifices of my wife and children who have always been there for me, showing patience even when I was in a bad state. I want to change and become a better husband." (R2)

"I want to apologize to my mother and siblings for causing them trouble all this time and thank you for still accepting me. I promise to stay committed to my recovery." (R3)

"To my child, wife, mother, and family, I will change and try to make you all happy. Thank you for never leaving me." (R4)

"My mom and children have been my strength all this time. Mom's prayers and blessings are very important to me. Thank you, Mom, for always being with me." (R5)

3. Community Support – All study participants agree that it is difficult to regain support and trust from the community. They feel that they are often blamed, but the outcomes of the discussions together lead them to agree that community support is a lengthy process that requires patience. Some statements from the study participants regarding community support include:

"I will always try to do good things even though sometimes I'm mocked, but thinking about my recovery keeps me going." (R3)

"Actually, I understand that it is not easy to regain people's trust in someone like me who used to be an addict. There are times when I feel weak, but the AADK team has helped me a lot and boosted my spirits." (R2)

Theme 2: Understanding Conflict Management Elements in the Recovery Process

There are two identified sub-themes emerged from the analysis which involved

- a. Self-Preparation in Facing Conflicts – The study participants comprehend that every individual consistently encounters conflicts, especially during the recovery process. Each person confronts conflicts daily, and these challenges vary according to their individual capabilities, as reflected in statements like:

"For me, everyone faces problems; it's just that the problems I face might not be the same as others. The most important thing is to know how to manage them so I don't end up relapsing." (R5)

"Sometimes we need others to help us understand our problems. After discussing with this group, I realized that there are times when we need others to help us find solutions to our problems." (R3)

- b. Rational Actions in Resolving Conflicts – The study participants expressed that there are times when they cannot think rationally when facing conflicts. The majority agreed that they need rational thinking and problem-solving skills to address conflicts. Without this knowledge, there is a high possibility of relapse, as their claims in statements such as

"Sometimes, when problems arise, it's hard to think clearly. There are times when I thought about using drugs to forget the problems." (R1)

"In the past, I would just use drugs when I was really stressed out, but now I realize that using drugs doesn't solve the problems, it just makes them worse." (R3)

"Now I feel grateful for being in the AADK program, at least I have a place to share my problems and at the same time, I can learn new things. If I were still the way I used to be, I would have been even worse off." (R4)

Based on the first theme, it is evident that social support is crucial in helping clients stay on the path of recovery. The majority of the respondents agreed that they greatly need support from close family members and the surrounding community. They stated that the most challenging aspect for them is facing societal stigma, but they believe that if they want to regain the trust of the community, they need to be patient and consistently make changes so that the community becomes aware of their efforts to change.

According to Idris, Fuziah and Mariamdarani (2020), self-confidence for change among former drug users can be enhanced when former drug users, drug counsellors, social workers, family members, and the entire community join forces to play their respective roles in restoring spirits and rebuilding the self-confidence of former users to create a new and more fulfilling life. These findings are also supported by Aziz et al. (2021) in their study, which found that social support is a crucial element in supporting drug users' self-control to remain at a high level and prevent relapse. Social support is a fundamental element in the drug recovery process and has proven effective through several previous studies. Similarly, a study conducted by Said et al. (2021) to examine the factors influencing relapse among Persons Under Supervision (OKP) in drug addiction found that relapsing drug users are more likely to return to drug use if they are in the following conditions: lack of family support for change, environmental factors such as losing community support, and the stigma associated with drug users themselves.

In other words, social support is crucial in assisting clients in the recovery process, and as a result, the recovery modules in the treatment and recovery program at AADK also include sub-modules related to social support programs. This statement is aligned with the findings of the study by Ibrahim et al. (2020), which indicated that the majority of respondents had a positive view of the Social Support Group program they participated in, as it helped them build social support within their community.

Therefore, based on the findings and support from previous studies, it is clear that social support plays a vital role in assisting those in the recovery process. Every individual requires a strong support system to navigate life, as they mutually rely on one another. Similarly, for clients participating in the recovery program, their support system is important because their spirits are fragile, and their motivation needs constant reinforcement. With support from those around them, they can continue their journey of recovery and carry on with their lives.

The second theme, on the other hand, focuses on the understanding of conflict management, particularly the conflicts they face during the recovery process. Respondents comprehend that conflicts are constantly present, whether in normal individuals or in those striving for recovery. However, the conflicts experienced by clients in the recovery process are often centred around themselves. Self-resilience is one of the key elements that can aid them in managing these conflicts effectively. Resilience is defined as both a psychological and biological strength that humans utilize to successfully navigate through changes (Nordin & Amat, 2021). Effective conflict management requires a strong sense of self or high resilience, as facing conflicts necessitates maintaining a positive attitude in responding to the situations encountered. As mentioned by Nordin and Amat (2021), resilience is a person's approach to dealing with difficulties. Moreover, self-regulation is also an important element in managing conflicts during the recovery process. According to Aziz et.al (2021), self-regulation allows an individual to be disciplined and adhere to rules for the purpose of achieving certain goals. If they possess effective self-regulation, they can effectively manage the conflicts they encounter throughout their lives.

Another element in managing conflicts is participating in the provided recovery programs. One of the components within the recovery program is the relapse prevention program. Various psychoeducational groups within this relapse prevention program can help those in the recovery process to transform their lives. This also includes conflict management. A study by Ibrahim et al. (2020) regarding the perspectives of former drug users on the Cure and Care Rehabilitation Center (CCRC) program indicated that respondents acknowledged the relapse prevention program's role in enhancing their knowledge of strategies to maintain recovery, assisting in anger management, stress coping exercises, and problem-solving skills.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the drug rehabilitation program conducted by the National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK) encompasses the entire life of an individual. It encompasses the biopsychosocial and spiritual aspects if clients fully participate in the recovery program in order to remain in higher levels of the recovery process. However, diversity and creativity are needed among officers to ensure that the recovery programs remain engaging and do not become monotonous, which could lead to clients losing interest in participating.

As such, group guidance and counseling are essential components in assisting clients in managing conflicts, whether they are related to recovery or other conflicts that are related to life. Furthermore, groups that utilize specific module approaches can help counselors or recovery officers gather information and achieve group objectives more effectively. It is recommended that guidance and counseling groups aimed at addressing drug addiction issues utilize various modules or approaches that can facilitate and enhance the clients' recovery process.

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