

*Caring in Crisis: Unveiling Compassion Fatigue Among Indonesian School Counselors*

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**Abstract**

The large number of traumatic problems in adolescents and the shortage of school counsellors cause school counsellors to have a heavier workload. Compassion fatigue occurs when a counsellor is unable to consistently demonstrate empathy, compassion and care to clients. This is due to the fact that constant contact with clients undergoing intense emotional experiences is very draining on the counsellor's physical and emotional reserves. This study aims to identify and describe compassion fatigue in school counsellors in Indonesia. A systematic research approach was required for this methodology to be successful. We used an online survey to collect data. To analyse it, we used the RASCH model to categorise the level of compassion fatigue in school counsellors. There are two indicators: job burnout and secondary trauma. The 13 items in the tool were used to measure the severity of compassion fatigue in counsellors. The study involved 69 school counsellors who were all actively involved in providing counselling services in junior high schools in Indonesia. The findings obtained from this study revealed that school counsellors in public junior secondary schools in Indonesia experience compassion fatigue at a moderate level.

Keywords: Compassion Fatigue, School Counsellor, RASCH Model

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## Introduction

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, is a state of exhaustion and sadness experienced by individuals who regularly provide care and support to others who have experienced trauma or suffering. It is a form of burnout that results from prolonged exposure to the suffering and trauma of others (Figley, 1995). Compassion fatigue can manifest in several ways, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, inability to complete tasks, loss of motivation, decreased empathy, and decreased ability to respond effectively to the needs of others. This can affect an individual's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, and can affect the quality of care provided (Sangganjanavanich & Balkin, 2013). A counsellor is not exempt from this problem.

The notion that counsellors are likely to experience compassion fatigue is one that is widely accepted by many experts in the field of mental health and counselling. Counsellors and other mental health professionals who regularly provide care and support to clients experiencing trauma and suffering can be vulnerable to compassion fatigue (Coetzee & Klopper, 2010). School counsellors face a variety of challenging demands that lead to stress, empathy fatigue, emotional exhaustion, instability and subsequently cause counsellors to quit the job (Mullen et al., 2017). It was noted that 53.7% of counsellors experienced compassion fatigue, characterised by low ability to manage stress, experiencing difficult clinical events, having more clinically troubled counsellors, relying on religion as a coping strategy, and seeking support to manage stress (Udipi et al., 2008). Counsellors in the West also face similar issues such as career and personal conflicts resulting in stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Smith, 2017). This is also the case in Malaysia, where guidance and counselling teachers also face difficult situations in their careers and personal lives, and this must be addressed so that clients get quality services (Mahomed et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the condition of counsellors in Indonesia is almost the same. School counsellors in DKI Jakarta experience compassion fatigue at a moderate stage (Ristian et al., 2021).

Counsellors may be directly or indirectly exposed to their clients' traumatic experiences, and sometimes deal with very difficult and complicated cases. Counsellors can also feel overwhelmed by the expectations and demands of their clients and work environment, and feel less emotionally and professionally fulfilled (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). If a counsellor experiences compassion fatigue, this can have a negative impact on their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, and can affect the quality of care they provide to clients (Stamm, 2012). Some of the impacts that may occur if counsellors experience compassion fatigue include: (1) prolonged emotional and physical exhaustion, (2) loss of motivation and passion in work, (3) depression and anxiety, (4) sleep and eating disorders, (5) inability to complete tasks or responsibilities effectively, (6) decreased empathy and ability to respond well to client needs, (7) difficulty in building healthy and positive relationships with clients, (8) increased risk for errors and accidents in counselling practice (Jenkins & Baird, 2002). At this stage counsellors will experience several symptoms that indicate they are experiencing compassion fatigue including feelings of sadness, anxiety, depression, nightmares, difficulty sleeping, dizziness, interference with daily activities, obsessiveness, withdrawal from the environment (Hoffman et al., 2007). Compassion fatigue can erode a professional's ability to function at an optimal level (Showalter, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial for counsellors to recognise the early signs of compassion fatigue and take steps to address and prevent it (Adams et al., 2006). If a counsellor feels that they have experienced compassion fatigue, they should seek professional support and appropriate resources to help them overcome this and restore emotional and psychological balance.

It is concluded that there are two questions in this study, namely:

- Q 1: What is the compassion fatigue profile of junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia based on gender?
- Q 2: What is the compassion fatigue profile of junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia based on length of service?

## Methods

The method used in this research is quantitative with the data analysis technique is the RASCH model. The instrument used to measure the level of compassion fatigue of counsellors consists of two indicators, namely job burnout and secondary trauma, all totalling 13 items. The purpose of this study was to obtain a description/profile of compassion fatigue of junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia. Whether it is classified as high, medium, or low. Respondents involved were 69 junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia spread from 11 provinces, namely East Java, Central Java, West Java, Bali, Riau, South Sumatra: Palembang, Lampung, East Kalimantan: Samarinda, Madura, DKI Jakarta, Special Region of Yogyakarta. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire online. Data were collected in excel and then analysed with the help of WINSTEPS Version 5.1.5.1. for data validation and cleaning.

## Results

Q1: What is the compassion fatigue profile of junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia based on gender?

First, the compassion fatigue profile of junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia in terms of gender was examined. The findings in Table 1, show that the mean measure for male respondents is -1.75, while for female respondents it is -2.38. This indicates that male junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia have a higher level of compassion fatigue than female junior high school counseling teachers.

**Table 1. Analysis of Compassion Fatigue Level by Gender**

Subtotal specification is: PSUBTOTAL= @JENIS-KEL

ALL PERSON SCORES ARE NON-EXTREME

PERSON	MEAN	MEAN	MEAN	S.E.					MODEL	MODEL		TRUE	MEAN	
COUNT	SCORE	COUNT	MEASURE	MEAN	P.SD	S.SD	MEDIAN	SEPARATION	RELIABILITY	RMSE	SD	OUTFIT	CODE	
63	21.3	13.0	-2.22	.19	1.46	1.47	-2.33	2.19	.83	.61	1.33	.93	*	
16	23.2	13.0	-1.75	.35	1.35	1.39	-1.62	2.32	.84	.53	1.24	.78	L	
47	20.6	13.0	-2.38	.22	1.46	1.48	-2.60	2.10	.81	.63	1.32	.98	P	

Q2: What is the compassion fatigue profile of junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia based on tenure?

From the data obtained, it was found that compassion fatigue of junior high school counseling teachers in Indonesia is more likely to be experienced by counseling teachers who have less than 5 years of service. It can be seen in Table 2, that counseling teachers with less

than 5 years of service have a compassion fatigue score of -1.30. Meanwhile, the longer the BK teachers' tenure, the lower their compassion fatigue level. It appears that the compassion fatigue score of counseling teachers who have more than 5 years of service and less than 10 years is -2.54. While the lowest compassion fatigue is for counseling teachers who have more than 10 years of service, with a score of -2.97.

**Table 2. Analysis of Compassion Fatigue Level Based on Years of Service**

Subtotal specification is: PSUBTOTAL= @MASA-KERJ

ALL PERSON SCORES ARE NON-EXTREME

PERSON	MEAN	MEAN	MEAN	S. E.					MODEL	MODEL		TRUE	MEAN	
COUNT	SCORE	COUNT	MEASURE	MEAN	P. SD	S. SD	MEDIAN	SEPARATION	RELIABILITY	RMSE	SD	OUTFIT	CODE	
63	21.3	13.0	-2.22	.19	1.46	1.47	-2.33	2.19	.83	.61	1.33	.93	***	
25	25.2	13.0	-1.30	.23	1.13	1.16	-.87	2.27	.84	.46	1.04	.94	< 5	
Tahun	25	18.4	13.0	-2.97	.29	1.41	1.44	-3.29	1.68	.74	.72	1.22	.97	> 10
Tahun	13	19.3	13.0	-2.54	.32	1.11	1.16	-2.60	1.52	.70	.61	.93	.85	> 5
Tahun														

## Conclusions and Discussion

This study aims to determine the compassion fatigue profile of junior high school school counsellors in Indonesia. Specifically on the details of gender and tenure of school counsellors. Based on the results obtained, it is known that based on gender, it is the male junior high school counsellors in Indonesia who experience higher compassion fatigue. Although generalisations based on gender are not always accurate, and each individual is unique. However, in certain contexts, male counsellors may experience higher compassion fatigue scores compared to their female counterparts. This is because Indonesia has a deeply rooted and long-standing patriarchal culture (Nilan & Demartoto, 2012).

Patriarchal culture is a social system that places men at the centre of power and decision-making (Weber, 1974). In a patriarchal culture, men are considered superior to women, and women are considered subordinate to men (Brahmana, 2017). In this culture, men are often portrayed as strong, tough, and able to protect (Lindsey, 2015). Meanwhile, women are seen as the opposite. They are often portrayed as weak, gentle, and in need of protection. This stereotype causes men to feel required to always appear strong, assertive, and have good self-control (Courtenay, 2000). This gender stigma in Indonesia's patriarchal culture leads men not to show feelings and emotions that are considered weak such as sadness, fear, or anger that they feel openly (O'neil, 1981). (Naylor et al., 1980) suggest that role conflict may arise when an individual expects roles from more sources, yet he or she is unable to fulfil all of these expectations. This can lead to stress and emotional exhaustion. Societal stigma towards gender inequality as well as the absence of support for male counsellors tends to increase the sense of isolation that leads to gender role conflict.

Role conflict that arises because a man or woman is unable to perform the role expected by society or the norms/rules that apply in the environment is generally referred to as gender role conflict (O'neil, 2015). The concept of gender role conflict among men began in the late 1970s, when research topics focused more on women than men. The women's movement in the 1970s, known as women's emancipation, was the foundation of the increasing concern for

women's rights (O'neil, 1981), so men seemed to be neglected. Gender role conflict among men, as stated by O'neil (2008), consists of four patterns including Success/Power/Competition (SPC), Restrictive Emotionality (RE), Restrictive Affectionate Behaviour between Men (RABBM) and Conflict Between Work and Family Relations (CBWFR). RE is defined as the limitation and anxiety of individuals in expressing ideas, feelings, as well as limitations in obtaining words to express basic emotions. It is not uncommon for male counsellors to be unable to express what they feel freely. RABBM is the limitation in expressing feelings and thoughts to fellow men, as well as the difficulty in making physical contact. Therefore, male counsellors may feel less supported by their peers or the community in managing their emotional burden. The third factor, SPC, is described as a personal attitude towards what success achieves through competition and power. Meanwhile, CBWFR reflects limitations in balancing work, education and family relationships that lead to health problems, overwork, stress, and lack of leisure and relaxation.

The role conflict experienced by male school counsellors brings about negative feelings. These persistent negative feelings tend to lead to stressful experiences that affect the physiological condition and behaviour of the individual. According to O'neil (2015), gender role conflict in men generally has a very adverse negative impact, such as stress, depression, drug use, heart attacks, alcohol consumption, and suicidal ideation. This opinion is also supported by the statement (Mahalik & Rochlen, 2006) that the psychological problems experienced by men related to gender role conflict are depression, anxiety and stress.

The dynamics of stress and compassion fatigue have been discussed by (Pearlin et al., 1981) which states that challenging environments (stress) usually require individuals to respond either physiologically through changes in cognitive function. Similar to the stress process, compassion fatigue researchers argue that other aspects of the formal work environment may influence the likelihood of increasing compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995, 2002; Kassam-Adams, 1995), including societal stigma in patriarchal cultures. Therefore, they tend to feel stressed, making male school counsellors more vulnerable to compassion fatigue.

Meanwhile, based on tenure, it is the novice counsellors who have a high compassion fatigue score. Novice counsellors are exploring the early stages of their career in counselling. Of course, as novice counsellors, they may not have sufficient experience (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016) to effectively manage the emotional burden and stress that arise in the context of counselling work (Kuznetsova et al., 2019). Crisis situations or intense case stories can be a more challenging stimulus for those who are still building skills and understanding. The process of learning to adapt (Star, 2013) to the facts on the ground that provide real cases of negative counselling experiences, will attract novice counsellors to soak in the emotions of the counsellor more intensely and excessively resulting in performance anxiety (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003a). Moreover, they still do not have mature skills (Borders & Brown, 2022) in dealing with complex or emotionally demanding cases. These conditions tend to increase the risk of emotional exhaustion (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006) which leads to compassion fatigue.

Novice counsellors usually have high expectations about how important their role is in helping the counsellor (Karymova, 2017). When they encounter difficulties in carrying out effective counselling, it may become a self-record that they feel incompetent. Being aware that expectations and work realities may not always align (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003b), encourages novice counsellors to swallow disappointment early in their career. This condition is one of the triggers of compassion fatigue in novice counsellors.

Another variable that causes compassion fatigue in novice counsellors to be higher than their senior counterparts is a less supportive work environment (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003b). Possibly, some novice counsellors work in an unhealthy environment, for example with excessive workload (Amatea & Clark, 2005), lack of resources such as supportive mentors (Daniels & Larson, 2001) or lack of employee welfare support policies. Most schools in Indonesia have a disproportionate number of counselling teachers, which is around 1 counselling teacher to 306 students (Bahri, 2020). If novice counsellors face too large a workload, they may find it difficult to manage the number of counsellors or tasks assigned. The inability to balance the workload can lead to serious physical and mental fatigue in novice counsellors (Bickmore & Curry, 2013). This will be exacerbated by the lack of required resources, such as time, funds, or equipment. These resource limitations can hinder the counsellor's ability to provide optimal services. If novice counsellors are faced with conditions that lead to negative self-evaluation, they will easily feel helplessness and confidence deficit in their work. As a result, they will be closer to compassion fatigue.

It is therefore necessary for educational institutions where counsellors work to provide adequate employee welfare support policies. However, novice counsellors working under institutions that are unable to provide this support, will also be highly vulnerable to compassion fatigue. Basically, novice counsellors need social or professional support (Crutchfield & Borders, 1997). Although counsellors in Indonesia have MGBK, this is still very difficult to realise. The inability of novice counsellors to share experiences and gain support from colleagues (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003) may increase the risk of emotional isolation. In addition, policies that do not support (Bickmore & Curry, 2013) employee well-being, such as lack of leave, work flexibility policies, or mental wellbeing programmes, can make it difficult for counsellors to maintain a work-life balance. Novice counsellors who feel unsupported in maintaining their well-being tend to be more prone to stress and emotional exhaustion.

It is not uncommon for novice counsellors to encounter unsupportive supervisors and clients (Bickmore & Curry, 2013). It is possible that they may struggle in the face of pressure from supervisors or counsellors to deliver quick results or fulfil expectations that may be unrealistic. These pressures can lead to anxiety and frustration. This will be exacerbated by novice counsellors not being supported in maintaining their well-being (Chen, 2019). Novice counsellors who go through these experiences are likely to be more vulnerable to stress and emotional exhaustion.

In the face of these conditions, it is important to pay attention to the well-being needs of employees and ensure adequate support (Kincanon, 2022). Organisations need to implement management policies and practices that support counsellors' psychological well-being, including the provision of effective supervision, empowerment of resources including senior counsellors (Bickmore & Curry, 2013), and increased awareness of mental well-being issues in the workplace. However, counsellors can prevent this from happening by developing coping strategies (Mahomed et al., 2019). Furthermore, counsellors should begin to explore and investigate the symptoms of compassion fatigue independently/self-help in order to find solutions and find support so as not to cause harm to others (Fahy, 2007).

The conclusion of this study shows that junior high school counsellors in Indonesia, especially those who are male, tend to experience higher compassion fatigue. Factors that could explain this involve the strong patriarchal culture in Indonesia, where men are considered superior and are expected to show strength, control, and assertiveness.

In male counsellors, gender role conflict arises due to social expectations to always appear strong and not express emotions that are considered weak. Stigma towards gender equality and lack of support for male counsellors can increase feelings of isolation and gender role conflict, ultimately contributing to compassion fatigue.

In addition, novice counsellors, especially in the early stages of their careers, are also prone to compassion fatigue. Factors such as lack of experience, high expectations, lack of social or professional support, and unsupportive work environment conditions may increase the risk of compassion fatigue in novice counsellors.

### **Suggestions**

1. Organisations need to implement management policies and practices that support counsellors' psychological well-being, including providing effective supervision and empowering resources.
2. There is a need for education and training that raises awareness of mental wellbeing issues in the workplace.
3. Counsellors need to develop coping strategies to deal with pressure and stress that arise in their work. This involves developing effective coping mechanisms and planning preventive actions.
4. Counsellors need to self-monitor and self-investigate symptoms of compassion fatigue. Building awareness of their own psychological state can help identify potential risks early.
5. The establishment of a support network among counsellors, both experienced and novice, can help reduce emotional isolation and provide necessary support.

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