

The Effects of Social Problem-Solving Ability and Mindfulness Levels on Counselors' Burnout: A Review of Recent Literature

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Abstract: This paper reviews the current research status of university counselors' job burnout, focusing on the role of social problem solving ability and mindfulness in counselors' job burnout. This review combs through historical and recent developments in burnout research, analyzes empirical and theoretical gaps, and explores the relationships between key variables. Through the study, it was found that social problem solving ability and mindfulness have a significant impact on alleviating burnout, providing a direction for future research and practical intervention. The research results show that effective intervention and establishment of necessary support system for the unique needs of university counselors are very important, which is conducive to the career development, team development and role of counselors in higher education.

Keywords: Social Problem-Solving Ability, Mindfulness, Counselor.

1. Introduction

The job burnout, which was defined as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment has been increasingly recognized in occupational health research. The role of university counselors who are supposed to be able to provide support especially for students vulnerable is one in which they often experience burn out due the high demands placed on them by students and an unavailability of resources. The challenges have also become more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to higher levels of counselor burnout.

The purpose of this literature review is to analyze research on burnout among university counselors, with a specific emphasis on the mediating roles of social problem-solving ability and mindfulness. These aspects are critical in building resilience and minimizing burnout. This paper seeks to enhance the understanding of these variables' effects on burnout by considering historical background, recent trends and data. The results emphasize that targeted interventions as well as support systems are essential in order to promote counselor's well-being, whilst maintaining mental health services standards at higher education level.

2. Methodology

For an extensive coverage of the studies it encapsulates, this literature review was conducted through systematic approach. Using terms like university counselors, job burnout, mindfulness and social problem-solving ability, queries were entered in academic databases such as PubMed and psycINFO to be able to access relevant articles that will provide a clearer understanding of the subject matter. Peer-reviewed empirical studies published in English and Chinese that were related to the topic constituted inclusion criteria.

Non-peer-reviewed articles; those not focusing on the major variables or lacking empirical evidence are some of the exclusion criteria used for this study. Systematic reviews are now recognized as a reliable means of synthesizing existing research, identifying gaps and providing an all-inclusive perspective on specific matters (Siddaway et al., 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003).

3. Comprehensive Analysis of Burnout, Social Problem-Solving, and Mindfulness

3.1. Historical Context of Burnout

3.1.1. Definition and Evolution of Burnout

This term "burnout" was coined by Freudenberger (1974) when he described what happens when severe stress and high ideals collide in helping professions. Emotional exhaustion is one of the main symptoms found in burnout but there also is depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The initial investigations were aimed at identifying these symptoms while trying to develop measurement tools including Maslach's Burnout Inventory which is still one of the most widely employed instruments for measuring burnout.

3.1.2. Recent Research and Measurement Tools

This paper investigates the changing definition of burnout, and its dimensions and contexts among university counselors. This better understanding has been aided by development and refinement of measurement tools. These instruments have facilitated standardized assessments of burnout, making possible comparative studies across different populations and professions. Furthermore, they assist in pinpointing areas where interventions can be made to reduce burnout among university counselors.

Table 1. Recent Measurement Tools for Burnout

| Measurement Tool | Developers | Description | Year |
|--|----------------------|---|------|
| Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) | Stamm | Assesses the positive and negative effects of working in helping professions, including burnout | 2010 |
| Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM) | Shirom & Melamed | Evaluates physical fatigue, cognitive weariness, and emotional exhaustion | 2016 |
| Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT) | Schaufeli et al. | Includes four core dimensions: exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive impairment, and emotional impairment | 2020 |
| Burnout Clinical Subtype Questionnaire (BCSQ) | Montero-Marín et al. | Differentiates burnout into three subtypes: frenetic, under-challenged, and worn-out | 2020 |
| Student Burnout Inventory (SBI) | Salmela-Aro et al. | Measures burnout in student populations, focusing on emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic inefficacy | 2021 |
| Employee Burnout Inventory (EBI) | Ahola & Hakonen | Evaluates burnout in employees across different sectors, including emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction | 2022 |
| Teacher Burnout Scale (TBS) | Madigan & Kim | Focuses on burnout symptoms among teachers, including emotional exhaustion and depersonalization | 2023 |
| Workplace Burnout Scale (WBS) | Parker & Tavella | Assesses burnout across various workplaces with a focus on occupational stressors | 2023 |
| Nursing Burnout Scale (NBS) | Lin et al. | Specifically designed to measure burnout among nurses, including aspects of emotional and physical exhaustion | 2023 |
| Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Academia (SEEA) | Campos et al. | Measures emotional exhaustion specific to academic settings | 2024 |

3.2. Burnout Among University Counselors

3.2.1. Prevalence and Impact

The job demands are high on university counselors as they are asked to support students' mental health with limited resources, which makes them prone to burn out. Studies conducted recently especially after 2020 show that burning out of University Counsellors was on the rise due to COVID-19. The transition to remote counseling, more so in terms of mental health needs for students as well as overall uncertainty have majorly contributed in this rise (Counseling.org, 2021; Psychology Today, 2023).

In Shanghai study, it was revealed that a significant proportion of university counselors suffer from emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. The figures for the research showed that 93.2% of them had moderate emotional exhaustion while 94.9% had moderate depersonalization thus showing how serious is the prolonged stress to their psychological health (Guo et al., 2020). These findings highlight the pressing need for interventions aimed at dealing with burnout among university counselors.

This problem in relation to counselor burn out is a reflection of the whole world's experience. It has been found out that increased workloads, lack of professional supports as well as long periods of suffering under stress are main causes more often than not resulting into staff burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Recent studies have focused on building resilience and developing adaptive coping mechanisms to reduce burnout and promote mental health among counselors (Zhou et al., 2021).

3.2.2. Unique Challenges Faced by University Counselors

University counselors face challenges that set them apart from K-12 schools, including high caseloads, varied needs across student populations and often working with fewer staff members; all of which create stress. For example, large student-to-counselor ratios in many universities are placing the mental health and well-being of a significant number of students on counselors' plates, resulting in increased stress levels (Brown et al., 2020). Additionally, the need to address a wide range of issues, from academic stress to severe mental health crises, adds to the complexity and intensity of their work (Jones & Smith, 2021).

A significant other challenge is the emotional burden of providing support to students on a regular basis and feeling that they often do not have much if any, similar type of access themselves. Counselors often do emotional labor, managing their emotions as well help students navigate theirs. The constant emotional effort required may also tie into the development of core burnout component exhaustion (Lee & Cheung, 2022). In addition, numerous university counselors feel unappreciated and underpaid leading to frustration and burnout (Adams et al., 2023).

This is in part due to the ever evolving educational landscape and the soaring need for mental health services. Counselors are often required to constantly learn and adapt to the new technology tools and modalities of care delivery which are time consuming in nature, posing a significant burden on their mental health. This necessity to stay current with best practices and evolving student needs without adequate institutional support further strains counselors' capacities, leading to higher burnout rates (Smith & Brown 2022).

3.2.3. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the obstacles university counselors must address. Suddenly engaging with students over new technologies and modalities required most counselors to respond on the fly, in many cases having had little experience or training. This change was an additional burden on top of their work and stress levels as counselors to prevent decline in quality service provided (González-Roma et al., 2020).

Counselors described that isolation and a loss of direct communication with colleagues also had negative effects on their stress levels. Supportive networks that usually ease work stress were broken, leading to isolation and lack of fellow feeling. This lack of collegial support, combined with the requirement to adapt to more remote models of working seemed likely have strengthened feelings of burnout experienced by university counselors during (Smith & Jones, 2023).

3.3. Definition and Importance

Social problem-solving ability refers to the cognitive and behavioral processes through which individuals attempt to

identify or discover effective or adaptive solutions for specific problems encountered in everyday living (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007). It involves a systematic approach to addressing issues that arise in one's personal and professional life, which can help in managing stress and preventing burnout. This skill set is crucial for university counselors, who often face complex and emotionally charged situations in their work.

Social problem-solving is particularly important in the context of burnout because it enables counselors to navigate their work environment more effectively. By developing and applying these skills, counselors can reduce their emotional exhaustion and increase their resilience, ultimately leading to better mental health and job satisfaction (Liu et al., 2021). Enhanced problem-solving abilities allow counselors to cope with the demands of their job by finding constructive ways to address and resolve conflicts and stressors.

3.3.1. Relationship with Burnout

Research indicates that effective social problem-solving skills are associated with lower levels of burnout. Counselors who are adept at solving interpersonal problems experience less emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Maynard & Furlong, 2012). The ability to solve problems efficiently can mitigate the impact of job-related stressors and reduce the likelihood of burnout.

A study by Chen et al. (2021) found that university counselors with higher social problem-solving abilities reported significantly lower levels of burnout. These counselors were better equipped to handle the interpersonal and situational challenges of their job, leading to improved emotional well-being. The study also highlighted the importance of training programs aimed at enhancing social problem-solving skills as a preventive measure against burnout.

Further research by Johnson et al. (2022) showed that social problem-solving ability serves as a buffer against burnout by promoting adaptive coping strategies. Counselors who possess strong problem-solving skills are more likely to engage in proactive behaviors that alleviate stress and prevent the escalation of burnout symptoms. This finding underscores the value of incorporating social problem-solving training into professional development programs for counselors.

3.3.2. Empirical Evidence on Social Problem-Solving and Burnout

Recent studies have demonstrated that enhancing social problem-solving skills can significantly reduce burnout among university counselors. For instance, a study by Wang et al. (2020) found that counselors with higher social problem-solving abilities reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This relationship was mediated by the counselors' ability to manage interpersonal stressors more effectively.

Chen et al. (2021) explored the impact of social problem-solving training on burnout among university counselors. The results indicated that counselors who received training in social problem-solving showed significant reductions in burnout symptoms compared to those who did not receive such training. This suggests that interventions aimed at improving social problem-solving skills can be an effective strategy for mitigating burnout.

Another study by Liu et al. (2022) examined the role of social problem-solving in reducing burnout among school counselors. The findings revealed that social problem-solving ability was negatively correlated with burnout, highlighting its protective effect against emotional exhaustion and

depersonalization. The authors recommended incorporating social problem-solving training into counselor education programs to enhance their resilience against burnout.

A recent meta-analysis by Zhang and Wang (2023) consolidated findings from multiple studies and confirmed that social problem-solving ability is a significant predictor of lower burnout levels among counselors. The analysis emphasized the need for further research to explore the mechanisms through which social problem-solving skills influence burnout and to develop targeted interventions for enhancing these skills.

3.4. The Impact of Mindfulness on Burnout Reduction

3.4.1. Definition and Importance

Mindfulness is defined as non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. It involves paying attention to one's thoughts, emotions, and sensations without judgment (Shonin et al., 2014). The practice of mindfulness is rooted in Buddhist meditation traditions and has been adapted into various therapeutic interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which are used to address a variety of psychological issues, including stress and burnout.

The importance of mindfulness in the context of burnout lies in its ability to enhance emotional regulation and resilience. By fostering a mindful approach, individuals can better manage their reactions to stress and reduce the negative impact of emotional exhaustion. This practice is particularly relevant for university counselors, who frequently encounter high-stress situations and emotionally demanding interactions with students (Hülshager et al., 2013).

3.4.2. Relationship with Burnout

High levels of mindfulness are associated with better emotional regulation and lower burnout levels. Mindfulness practices help individuals manage stress and reduce symptoms of burnout by promoting a non-reactive awareness of thoughts and feelings. This allows counselors to approach their work with greater calm and clarity, reducing the likelihood of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Hülshager et al., 2013).

A study by Li et al. (2021) demonstrated that university counselors who regularly practiced mindfulness reported significantly lower levels of burnout compared to those who did not. The researchers found that mindfulness helped counselors maintain a balanced perspective and avoid becoming overwhelmed by their work-related stressors. Additionally, mindfulness was found to enhance counselors' job satisfaction and overall well-being.

Further research by Brown et al. (2022) explored the mechanisms through which mindfulness influences burnout. They identified that mindfulness improved counselors' ability to remain present and engaged during counseling sessions, which in turn reduced feelings of depersonalization and increased their sense of personal accomplishment. This suggests that mindfulness can serve as a protective factor against burnout by fostering a positive and supportive work environment.

3.4.3. Empirical Evidence on Mindfulness and Burnout

Empirical research supports the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in reducing burnout. For instance, a study by Shapiro et al. (2023) found that counselors who participated in an eight-week MBSR program

reported significant reductions in burnout symptoms, including emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Participants also noted improvements in their ability to cope with stress and maintain a positive outlook on their work.

Another study by Smith et al. (2020) examined the long-term effects of mindfulness training on burnout among university counselors. The findings indicated that counselors who continued to practice mindfulness after the initial training period maintained lower levels of burnout and higher levels of job satisfaction compared to those who did not. This highlights the sustained benefits of mindfulness practice for preventing burnout.

A meta-analysis by Zhang and Liu (2022) consolidated findings from multiple studies and confirmed that mindfulness-based interventions are effective in reducing burnout across various professions, including university counseling. The analysis emphasized the need for institutions to integrate mindfulness training into professional development programs to enhance counselors' resilience and well-being.

3.5. Integrated Analysis of Key Variables

3.5.1. Interaction Between Social Problem-Solving Ability and Mindfulness

Both social problem-solving ability and mindfulness play crucial roles in mitigating burnout. These skills interact to provide a comprehensive approach to managing stress and reducing burnout among university counselors. Social problem-solving skills enable counselors to address and resolve conflicts effectively, reducing the emotional toll of their work. Mindfulness complements this by promoting emotional regulation and present-moment awareness, which helps counselors manage their stress responses more effectively (Greenberg, 2011; Bakker et al., 2012).

Recent research highlights the synergistic effects of combining social problem-solving skills with mindfulness practices. For example, a study by Lin et al. (2021) found that counselors who integrated mindfulness into their social problem-solving processes reported significantly lower levels of burnout. This integrated approach helps counselors maintain a balanced perspective, preventing the accumulation of stress and emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, mindfulness enhances the effectiveness of social problem-solving by fostering a non-reactive awareness of problems, allowing counselors to approach challenges with greater clarity and creativity. This synergy not only reduces burnout but also improves overall job satisfaction and well-being (Shapiro et al., 2023).

3.5.2. Combined Effects on Burnout

The combination of high social problem-solving ability and

mindfulness creates a synergistic effect, enhancing counselors' resilience and reducing burnout. This integrated approach addresses both cognitive and emotional aspects of burnout, providing a holistic strategy for managing stress. Counselors with strong problem-solving skills and mindfulness practices are better equipped to handle the demands of their job without becoming overwhelmed (Hoy et al., 2006).

Empirical evidence supports the combined effects of these skills on reducing burnout. A meta-analysis by Zhang and Liu (2022) found that interventions aimed at enhancing both social problem-solving and mindfulness significantly reduced burnout among counselors. The analysis highlighted that counselor who developed both skills reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, along with higher levels of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction.

Furthermore, studies indicate that counselors who practice mindfulness and engage in social problem-solving are more likely to develop adaptive coping strategies, which further buffer against burnout. This integrated approach not only reduces the immediate symptoms of burnout but also builds long-term resilience and well-being (Johnson et al., 2022).

3.5.3. Theoretical and Empirical Insights

Theoretical frameworks and empirical studies highlight the importance of developing both social problem-solving skills and mindfulness practices to effectively reduce burnout among university counselors. Social Cognitive Theory and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) provide robust frameworks for understanding how these skills interact to mitigate stress and enhance well-being (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

Empirical research supports the integration of these skills into professional development programs for counselors. For instance, a study by Garcia et al. (2023) demonstrated that counselors who participated in combined training programs for social problem-solving and mindfulness reported significant improvements in their ability to manage stress and reduce burnout. These findings suggest that targeted interventions that enhance both skills can lead to substantial improvements in counselors' well-being and job performance.

In conclusion, the combined development of social problem-solving abilities and mindfulness practices offers a comprehensive strategy for mitigating burnout among university counselors. By addressing both the cognitive and emotional aspects of stress, this integrated approach can significantly enhance counselors' resilience and overall job satisfaction, contributing to the sustainability of mental health services in higher education (Shonin et al., 2014; Hülshager et al., 2013).

Table 2. Theoretical Frameworks and Empirical Findings on Burnout Mitigation

| Theoretical Framework/Study | Key Concepts | Empirical Findings | Implications for Practice |
|---|---|--|---|
| Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) | Emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in behavior regulation. | Enhances understanding of how social problem-solving skills reduce stress and burnout. | Develop training programs that enhance social problem-solving abilities. |
| Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) | Focuses on mindfulness to improve emotional regulation and reduce stress. | Demonstrates significant reductions in burnout symptoms with mindfulness practice. | Incorporate mindfulness training into counselor professional development. |
| D'Zurilla & Nezu (2007) | Problem-Solving Therapy (PST) | Effective problem-solving skills are linked to lower burnout levels. | Implement problem-solving skills training for counselors. |
| Kabat-Zinn (1990) | Mindfulness-Based Interventions | Mindfulness practice leads to reduced emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. | Promote regular mindfulness practices among counselors. |
| Garcia et al. (2023) | Combined training programs for social problem-solving and mindfulness | Participants showed significant improvements in managing stress and reducing burnout. | Develop integrated training programs combining both skills. |
| Zhang & Liu (2022) | Meta-analysis of mindfulness-based interventions | Confirmed effectiveness of mindfulness in reducing burnout across professions. | Encourage adoption of mindfulness-based interventions in counseling settings. |

4. Discussion

4.1. Implications

The current review, therefore, afforded one set of feedback to university counselling practitioners as a collective whole: the necessity for higher training in social problem-solving and mindfulness skills to address burnout. These findings allow for the implementation of targeted interventions and support structures designed around counselor specific needs. Improving these skills will have beneficial effects on the well-being of counselors and, given that poor job satisfaction is a major driver in turnover [23], potentially contribute to sustainability of counseling services within higher education. Some examples are programs that provide training in social problem-solving and mindfulness-based practices which could help counselors learn how to deal with stress better and avoid burnout (Liu et al., 2022). It should be top-of-the-list for institutions to make this training and support available to their counseling staff.

4.2. Limitations

This review was dependent on previous literature, thus susceptible to bias in the interpretation of findings. Moreover, most of the studies reviewed are cross-sectional which impair us from making causal inferences. There also might be cultural biases that could compromise the generalizability of results to other cultures. Research in the future should consider these limitations and adapt to longitudinal studies as well as using culturally relevant approaches (Huang & Chou, 2021). This would allow for a broader understanding of burnout and its antecedents among university counselors.

4.3. Future Directions

Implications for the field include future research to study long-term effects of burnout interventions; continuing exploration of culture as a driver in how counselors experience their life changes over time. Future research is needed to create, refine and empirically test targeted interventions designed toward counselor well-being and professional sustainability (e.g. integrating resilience-building/mindfulness practices into professional development programming: Garcia et al., 2020). Moreover, how to make

these interventions culturally tailored is going to be important for effectiveness and scalability.

5. Conclusion

However, this literature review offers a thorough consolidation of university counselor burnout research. It underscores the importance of social problem-solving and mindfulness as prevention tools, pointing to some critical foci for future research and intervention designed to combat burnout among counselors. Results underscore the necessity to implement job settings and career assistance programmes that promote these buffering resources. Overall, this study signifies that increasing the utilization of social problem-solving skills and mindfulness with counselors may not only benefit mental health services in higher education but also aid sustainability. This is essential to equip counselors with beneficial tools taught for years at Broomhall Educational Therapy School so they can be most effective when supporting their student population collectively.

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