



## Examining the Lived Experiences of Guidance Counselors' Self-Care Practices

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### Abstract

Ensuring their own well-being is essential to mental health practitioners to maintain the quality of their work for clients (Stainsby, 2018). However, many counselors fail to practice the skills and techniques they teach, and many are reluctant to seek help when they need it (Coaston, 2017). This study examined the self-care practices of 5 counselors to understand their recognition of the importance of self-care, their specific practices in self-care, its relation to the quality of their client service, and their learnings from their pandemic experiences. In 2019, during the pandemic, a Descriptive Phenomenological Approach was initially used to collect and analyze the self-reports from the Guidance Counselors. The study of these same counselors was followed up in 2023 to analyze their post-pandemic practices. The results for 2019 and 2023 both show that Guidance Counselors strongly recognize the importance of self-care and employ a variety of practices. However, following the pandemic, three new themes emerged in their understanding of self-care: the importance of developing resilience, self-responsibility, and human relationships.

*Key words: Guidance Counselors, self-care practices, pandemic and post-pandemic*

### Introduction

Providing mental health care for those who are emotionally troubled or stressed can be hard for mental health professionals (Nguyen, 2023). Counselors often suffer from painful situations, traumatic situations, and overwhelming emotions. Although most consultants have self-care knowledge and clarify its importance to clients and others, the

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imbalance between a counselor's self-care knowledge and actions persists. Damage may be caused by mental illness, personal problems, burnout, physical illness, and drug abuse, but it is also caused by exhaustion of emotional labor without rejuvenating self-care (Thomas & Morris, 2017). For example, bad living habits or unhealthy coping styles will contribute to mental health deterioration. In addition, some consultants may still have the idea that “speaking your problems will be humiliating”, especially for practitioners. The resulting shame may make them less likely to seek assistance (Graff, 2008; as cited in Coaston, 2017).

Although consulting professionals are very good at helping clients take care of themselves, they don't always consider their own self-care as a priority or practice themselves what they advise for their clients (Stainsby, 2018, as cited in Coaston, 2017).

When the Corona-19 virus outbreak happened, the role of guidance counselors expanded as they were recognized as a critical participant in the pandemic-related mental health issues. Counselors were exposed to different struggles, such as the responsibility to deliver services despite lockdowns caused by the pandemic. The overnight need to become home-based and online was a major adaptation for counselors. Post-pandemic, the additional roles they play since the transition back to face-to-face meetings contribute to the tendency of counselors to overwork for there is a shortage of manpower in this field, causing some to have unhealthy self-care (Jones et al., 2021, as cited in Siddiqui, 2023). Burnout, compassion fatigue, and a lack of human resources are just a few of the ongoing issues that affect guidance counselors' overall well-being (Lason & Myers, 2011, as cited in Gallardo & Chaves, 2022). Providing mental health services requires counselors to be in a good state of complete holistic health. Jun et al. (2020, as cited in Siddiqui, 2023) revealed that professionals in the field of health care should use the acronym COPE in dealing with their self-care: Controlling the things that you can, not the things you cannot; Open up and share your feelings; Practice daily stress reduction tactics, including physical activity; and Engage in mindfulness. Better self-care had a positive impact on counselors' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Siddiqui, 2023), and such practices will continue to assist counselors maintain their holistic self-health. Gökalp (2022) found self-care practices to be positively associated with counselor well-being, including reduced stress, anxiety, and depression, and increased emotional resilience. Ensuring well-being is sufficient to maintain the quality of work (Stainsby, 2018). In the study by Jones (2021), it was found that most counselors have a good work-life balance because of their self-care practices which the

home-based responsibility during the pandemic gave them. They spent more time at home, though for some that was a struggle as they were exposed to excessive working hours.

Self-care is vital to all professions and individuals who experience personal distress. Hence, this research would like to investigate the importance for guidance counselors to have self-care practices. The researchers focused on the following research objectives: (1) to understand the importance of self-care in the perception of guidance counselors; (2) to examine the different practices of guidance counselors in self-care; (3) to investigate the value of the human relationship that guidance counselors give; and (4) to know whether the pandemic had an impact on the self-care practices of guidance counselors.

The researchers were able to notice that there is limited research study available that focuses on the self-care practices of mental health professionals, moreover guidance counselors. This can be supported by Baker and Gabriel (2021) which shows that very little research on practitioner self-care was found while searching for publications using Google Scholar and journal databases (psychinfo and medline). Only one of the 907 results found while searching for "counselor" and "self-care" was related to the area of study under consideration. The majority of the results were in the form of books and were prescriptive. Hence, the researchers aim to provide substantial data on the experiences and self-care practices of guidance counselors in the Philippines. Furthermore, with an evident gap between the self-care practices done by counselors before and during the pandemic, it is primarily understood that counselors should understand how to incorporate self-care practices holistically and manageably depending on their needs and satisfaction.

### **Method**

The researchers sought to understand the lived experiences of the guidance counselors about their self-care. Hence, qualitative descriptive phenomenology played the role of a guiding light, leading researchers as they explored the diverse pathways of counselor self-care experiences through interviews and narratives (Kuusisto & Hirsjärvi, 2019). This exploration unearthed the underlying meanings, challenges, and strategies woven into their self-care practices (Heikkinen & Aalto, 2018). This rich collection of insights informed best practices, training programs, and support systems, ultimately fostering a healthier and more sustainable counseling ecosystem (Watkins & Greco, 2016).

A qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach provided a powerful tool for researchers seeking to unlock the intricate and subjective realm of counselor self-care practices. By navigating the diverse paths of these practices, this methodology not only illuminated the experiences of individual counselors but also held the potential to revolutionize the field. Ultimately, it aimed to promote individual well-being and empower counselors to provide the best possible care to their clients.

The study was conducted in two parts. The first part, conducted in 2019, employed a Descriptive Phenomenological Approach to explore the lived experiences of guidance counselors regarding their self-care practices. This method involved in-depth interviews, allowing researchers to gain an understanding of how individual counselors made sense of and navigated their self-care choices. Through meticulous analysis of the counselors' narratives, the study aimed to uncover thematic analysis in unique variations in their experiences. Researchers sought to delve deeper than surface-level descriptions, exploring the challenges, motivations, and personal meanings that counselors attributed to self-care within the context of their demanding profession. Ultimately, this IPA-driven approach aimed to illuminate the intricate ways in which guidance counselors integrated self-care into their lives and the impact it held on their overall well-being.

On the other hand, the second study was held in 2023, which used narrative analysis to illuminate the deeply personal narratives woven into guidance counselors' experiences with self-care. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews, inviting the same participants to share their stories of maintaining well-being amidst the challenges of their demanding profession. By analyzing these narratives, the study aimed to unravel common threads and reveal the unique symphony of meaning each counselor constructed around self-care. This approach went beyond mere descriptions, seeking to understand the motivations, challenges, and individual interpretations that shaped each counselor's self-care journey. Ultimately, the study sought to portray the intricate ways in which guidance counselors integrated self-care into their lives, highlighting the impact it held on their personal and professional well-being. Through narrative analysis, the study aimed to paint a rich picture of how guidance counselors navigate the crucial practice of self-care during their complex and demanding work.

## Sampling Procedure

The researchers were able to gather the respondents through purposive sampling. The participants were chosen based on the selection criteria. Furthermore, a total of five guidance counselors were interviewed for this study. The selection criteria are based on their work experience. All participants are guidance counselors with at least 3 years of experience. The participants are all in the school setting that is catering to students in senior high school. As the participants qualified to be part of the target sample, they were given informed consent.

## Profile of the Participants

The five participants were all experienced guidance counselors who are currently working in basic education institutions in Metro Manila. To keep the identity of the participants anonymous, they will be named differently.

During the data gathering in 2019, the participants provided guidance and counseling services to Grade 11 and 12 students. Aside from counseling sessions, they also conduct intake interviews, exit interviews, administration of personality tests and career inventory, and organize seminars, and research. The profiles of the five participants are as follows:

Participant 1 is a female counselor that is currently in her middle thirties and is currently working in a private high school institution.

Participant 2 is a male counselor that started his career at the age of 21. He has been in practice for 3 years. He is also fond of using cognitive-behavior therapy because of its applicability and efficacy.

Participant 3 is a female guidance counselor that has been helping students for 8 years already. She is now 31 years of age. She started her career back in 2011. She most of the time uses cognitive-behavior therapy during her sessions.

Participant 4 is a female counselor that focuses on practicing cognitive-behavior therapy in her 5 years of experience. She started her career track when she was 23, and now she is 28 years old.

Participant 5 is a male guidance counselor who has spent 15 years in this field. He was 21 years old when he first started his career. He is currently 36 years old. He is practicing different approaches by choosing which fits clients' needs, by conducting cognitive-behavior therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, solution-focused therapy, and reality therapy.

### **Instrumentation**

The researchers conducted a semi-structured, one-on-one interview with the participants. The questions were formulated to answer the assumptions of this study. The interview questions were validated by the course professor. However, probing and follow-up questions were asked during the interview to have a more in-depth idea of the topic.

The prepared questions were as follows:

1. What is self-care for you?
  - a. How do you apply it to yourself?
2. How do you take care of yourself?
3. What are your hobbies?
4. How does it help you achieve mental wellness?
5. Whenever you have a problem? Do you keep it to yourself or do you talk it out to someone whom you think understands you?
6. If so, who is your favorite confidant? Why?
7. If you are experiencing any setbacks, how do you manage that?
8. How does it affect your work?
9. Are there times you experience having a bad mood during a counseling session?
  - a. How do you deal with that?
10. Are there any problems in work-related activities that are bothering you?
  - a. For example, traffic jams? Or something else?
11. How do you manage to cope with these problems?
12. What are the cases you usually handle?
13. How do you find these cases?
14. How do you give importance to human relationships?
15. Are you open to being a friend of your counselee? Why or why not?

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

Before data gathering, the researchers created the questions for the first interview was constructed and validated by a research professor in 2019 who has a Doctoral degree in Psychology and the second constructed interview guide was then further finalized by a registered guidance counselor to further minimize bias and ensure clarity.

In 2019, data gathering was done using interview sessions. But before the data gathering, consent was solicited from the participants. Participants are informed that the

interview was recorded to gather an accurate transcription needed in making themes and codes. The background and nature were also explained thoroughly. The involvement of participants was made sure to be voluntary and agreed by both parties under terms.

Guidance counselors who qualified were asked about the day and schedule they were available for the interview session. They were told that the interview could last for at least an hour, and were oriented on other details about the in-depth discussion such as confidentiality of the data shared, how the researchers respected and not be biased on the participants because of sensitive data they may disclose.

The participants were informed about the recording of the interview to collect an accurate transcription of the session. A pseudonym was assigned instead of their real name in the presentation of the data. The confidentiality of the participants is accounted for by following the ethical standard guidelines to reduce harm if any.

The participants were also encouraged to ask questions, if there were any for clarifications or if there was any violent reaction to be addressed. The purpose of the participant's involvement in the study in general will be explained extensively. This made sure that the research process in the study was understood well.

The researchers asked questions relevant to the research topic guided by the validated questions and made sure the participant engagement in recollection, sharing of salient points of experiences, and summation of the story so the researcher was able to extract the essentials of the lived experiences. To systematize the information relevant to the study, clarifications were made wherein the researcher confirmed the information that needs further explanation.

On the other hand, in the 2023 study, the researchers gathered rich narratives about guidance counselors' self-care practices through online questionnaires filled with open-ended prompts. These prompts, constructed to evoke personal stories and reflections, were validated by a professional guidance counselor to ensure their effectiveness in capturing the nuances of the experience. To prevent ambiguity and ensure clarity, researchers followed up with participants on any responses deemed unclear. This proactive approach aimed to bridge potential understanding gaps and ensure the final data truly reflected the counselors' genuine voices and perspectives. This data-gathering procedure laid the groundwork for a profound exploration of self-care within the demanding world of guidance counseling.

### **Data Analysis**

Through a descriptive phenomenological analysis, the research intends to investigate and evaluate guidance counselors' self-care practices. This study explores guidance

counselors' subjective experiences to learn more about their self-care routines and the effects these practices have on their general well-being. To shed light on the many self-care techniques guidance counselors use to preserve their mental, emotional, and physical health, this research uses a phenomenological method to try to understand the essence and meaning underlying their lived experiences. Using an extensive data analysis, this research endeavors to augment the current corpus of information within the counseling domain, finally furnishing invaluable perspectives and suggestions for the augmentation of self-care behaviors among guidance counselors. The data collected from the participants were analyzed through thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke's six-step data analysis procedure.

## Results

### 2019 Results

This research was conducted to achieve a thorough understanding of how counselors use self-care in their profession. The results of the study are elaborated and discussed throughout the five focal themes identified by the researcher.

#### **Theme 1. Self-care as an important aspect among guidance counselors**

Participant 1 had defined self-care as "our way of taking care of ourselves probably emotionally, psychologically, mentally for us to go through our daily struggles of our life." Meanwhile, participant 5 sees self-care as "devoted time for yourself especially when you think that you need to replenish your energy or to at least breathe away from the stressful environment, or the fatigue of work. I think it is very important to allot time to relax your mind, and relax your body as well, for me that is self-care. It does not matter what you do but the important thing is that you give time for yourself."

In addition to that, participant 3 said "as a counselor, I have to take care of myself first. I believe I have to take care of myself first before I can take care of others. How can I be an effective counselor if uhm I am not taking care of myself? I have to make sure I'm healthy that I am sane so every day I am going to work and do what I have to do as a counselor, as an employee, as a daughter, sister, and so everything that I do, I need to make sure that I am physically healthy so I can do my job or task properly."

Participants see different implications of self-care for their mental wellness. Participant 1 added, "It is like my emotional trash can. Whenever I feel so trash and I have a lot of junk in my emotions in my psychological well-being. Those hobbies, those things that I do to release all those stresses are bringing me back to who I was before I



experienced those struggles. So, those things help me in my mental wellness to continuously provide the task that I need as a guidance counselor.” Through self-care, the participants were able to realize different benefits that they may gain; they were able to reiterate that it breaks the cycle of stress and bad emotions as it diverts their attention into something that they enjoy to have internal peace and fresh ideas. As Participant 3 said, “You don’t have to box yourself, you have to go out from time to time. I always say this to my colleagues or even my friends that after work you still have time, so you have to at least have a balance on everything.”

The participants' statements show their opinions on self-care and how important it is to them in many aspects of their lives. This viewpoint highlights how self-care is comprehensive and encompasses many facets of well-being. To deal with life's challenges, the participant understands the need to attend to emotional, psychological, and mental requirements. Also, it is the act of setting aside time for oneself, especially when one needs to refuel from a demanding work environment or feels worn out from work. This viewpoint highlights how crucial it is to set aside time for relaxation, which benefits the body as well as the mind. The participant highlights that setting aside time to prioritize one's well-being is more significant than the particular actions performed during self-care.

## **Theme 2. Ways on taking care of oneself: Understanding Individual Practices and Coping Mechanisms**

The participants have different ways on how they apply self-care to oneself. Whenever they feel stressed during the day or because of their counseling session, they have their way to lessen that stress that they feel. Participant 1 shared “as a counselor I just simply find something that gives me comfort whenever I feel so stressed. So, it is my way of doing self-care probably doing extraneous activities, doing some sports or sometimes I just lie in bed or something like that. Whatever suites me best.” Participant 2 said “Every time I get stressed with work or let’s say with other matters, I apply self-care as I make it to the point that I practice mindfulness and breathing exercises.” Participant 5 mentioned that “when I feel this I take time to be alone and do the things that I like to do, So like for in my case, I like coffee, I like looking around and I like walking so that’s what I do so to relax a little.” Most of the participants also said that their hobbies may help alleviate their stress levels through watching films or series, playing mobile games, and traveling.

The statements highlight the participants' unique approaches to self-care, which may involve different activities, practices, and hobbies. One participant shares that they find solace in laying in bed or unrelated sports or pastimes. The use of breathing techniques and mindfulness as a kind of self-care in stressful times is highlighted by Participant 2. Participant 5 likes to spend their alone time doing things they want to do, such as strolling, look around, and drinking coffee.

In general, the individuals highlight the significance of discovering activities that suit their unique requirements and preferences and provide them with comfort and relaxation. These results imply that self-care routines are quite individualistic and might differ substantially between people. Knowing these various coping techniques can assist guide interventions and support plans for those looking to enhance their well-being and successfully handle stress. The usefulness and long-term effects of these self-care techniques on people's general mental health and quality of life might be the subject of future studies in this field.

### **Theme 3. The need for handling personal issues**

As guidance counselors conduct their counseling sessions with their counsees, there is a need for them to be mentally ready to face their clients; thus, there is a necessity for them to handle their issues first before facing them. Participant 1 even said of a probable consequence "It affects my work at some point. Even though the situation requires you you know as the professional you cannot give anything anymore. So I need to rest from time to time. So it affects my work. I cannot give it all the time whenever my counselee desires or my counselee requires me to do it." Participant 2 added "For me, the most important thing whenever I have setbacks, I acknowledge the setback. Uhm... I embrace it for example if it brings so much pain. So I embrace first the pain until I feel okay that I was able to release the emotions before I take any action." About that, participant 3 said: "every day at work, we are always challenged by our day-to-day situations. But then again, I always have this mindset that I have to do something, if someone gives me a problem, if there is a problem I make that I have to solve it; even if sometimes I don't know how to solve the problem but I have to find the solution for it, because that's how you will be able to solve your challenges or how you will face the challenges. You look for the possible solutions." Furthermore, the participants highlighted that they have to separate their work life and personal life, especially since they have a certain image of a guidance counselor. As added by participant

4, "We also have ethics standards, and we cannot affect clients because of our problems. If I encounter a situation that I can't handle (when my status is bad / when I have a problem), I usually hand over all the details to my colleagues so as not to affect the client. But in general, I will deal with personal problems before work, or "leave them at home" without affecting my work."

The remarks provided in Theme 3 highlight how crucial it is for guidance counselors to take care of their problems before meeting with clients for counseling. The first participant highlights the possible harm that unresolved personal difficulties may cause to their capacity to provide their counselees with complete assistance. Participant 2 emphasizes how important it is to accept and acknowledge disappointments or suffering before acting appropriately. Participant 3 has a proactive approach to problem-solving and looking for answers to difficulties they encounter at work. The participants also emphasize how important it is to uphold ethical standards, have a clear separation between their personal and professional lives, and make sure that their issues don't interfere with their ability to serve customers. Ultimately, this subject emphasizes how important it is for guidance counselors to handle and deal with their concerns to maintain their effectiveness in supporting their clients.

#### **Theme 4. Confidants' role as guidance counselors**

Confidants have an essential role in the work-life balance of the guidance counselors. The participants emphasized that whenever they encounter issues it be at work or home, they say it to their confidants to lessen the burden of it and not to pour it out during their counseling sessions with the students. Participant 1 said that "I ask people, my colleagues, especially from the guidance office, I asked them how they handle this. My fiancé, of course, practitioner of psychology as well. So, at some point, yeah it depends on the degree of the problem. It is too much for me, I seek the people who understand me because, at some point in our life, guidance counselors are little you know, misinterpreted once we are outside the school. Especially me, at such a young age, whenever I speak about my profession, they see it as if I am just someone younger. So I usually find somebody who can understand me as well as my professional as the guidance counselor. So yeah I think so, I do find some people whenever I face the problem." Participant 3 gave examples that her confidence would depend on her problem "If it is work-related, if I have a problem at work, I talk to my boss about it. Uhm, but if it's personal, I talk to my friends

and my boyfriend.” All the participants were able to indicate that friends are people with whom one shares secret or private matters that are occurring in their life. All the people that they consider as confidants have the characteristics of being trustworthy and nonjudgmental, all the participants are also comfortable in sharing their situations with them.

The statements in Theme 4 emphasize how important confidants are to guidance counselors' ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. To lessen the load on their shoulders, the participants stress the value of confiding in trusted individuals rather than bringing them into counseling sessions with students. Participant 1 turns to their fiancé, a psychologist, as well as other staff members in the guidance office for advice and understanding. They say they need someone who can understand the special difficulties that guidance counselors encounter and who can offer help. Participant 3 distinguishes between talking to their supervisor about work-related difficulties and talking to friends and their partner about personal matters. The qualities of a confidant that are emphasized by all participants include reliability, the absence of judgment, and the capacity to establish a secure and welcoming environment for communication. This subject emphasizes how important confidants are in giving guidance counselors emotional support, empathy, and a safe environment to talk about their struggles in both their personal and professional lives.

### **Theme 5. Human relationship as an integral part of life**

All the participants see the importance of establishing human connections and relationship. This human relationship is not only applicable to their profession as counselors, but also to a person who needs interaction with friends, family, loved ones, or someone who needs help. Communication is also an important extent of building connections. Participant 1 alludes to “value human relationship too much. It is like I don't need a friend but somebody around that needs a friend that's why I'm trying to be friendly.”

Participant 2 gave importance to helping others and stated “... because if the relationship is trusting enough since there are people whom we can extend our share and help them. So for me, the basic principle in human interaction is to build trust with each other because being open starts there. If I have concerns, I can share with others without feeling judged, without fear that they will tell them that I am just acting out.” In addition, by Participant 3, “It's the purpose and our purpose to connect to others, to give our service

to others... Who are we like who else will oversee or help others but us? Of course, that is the most important value of life.”

Participant 4 stresses her philosophy that “humans are kind and good; so I will be as nice to people as possible, to everyone nicely. I try to understand the situation before I make a judgment. Understand and think about the situation. In this way, I will not affect specific situations or specific people because of my mistakes in judgment. So, it won't hurt others; I like to talk to people, I have a lot of friends, I also like to talk to strangers, sometimes I also participate in some volunteer activities, sometimes I don't know anyone.”

Meanwhile, participant 5 gave his advice that “relationship also works within the person so I try to also harmonize my relationship with myself from time to time so I try to reflect whether certain mistakes in my past I have already forgiven myself, for if how do I relate with other people, I try to take care of my relationship with them, I try to ask them to go out so that I wouldn't cut the contact, so that for me is very important.”

The participants' remarks emphasize the importance of interpersonal interactions in their lives. They stress the value of building relationships in both their personal and professional life, in addition to their capacity as counselors. The importance of communication in developing these connections was acknowledged by the participants, as it promotes transparency and trust. They show a great willingness to encourage and assist others without passing judgment. They also stress how important it is to reflect on oneself and have a healthy connection with oneself since these things have an impact on how one interacts with others. The importance of interpersonal ties in the participants' lives both personally and professionally is acknowledged. They stress that building deep partnerships requires support, trust, and communication. They make an effort to be kind, empathetic, and nonjudgmental towards others. They also understand how important it is to reflect on oneself and have a healthy connection with oneself to improve interactions with others.

## **2023 Results**

The researchers of the study decided to utilize the themes from 2019 to determine if there were any changes in the answers from the participants. In addition, the researchers would also explore if there were new themes or changes in the previous themes that have emerged in the 2023 results.

**Theme 1. Self-care as an important aspect among guidance counselors**

For the 2023 results, the participants have generally mentioned that they maintain their self-care by being aware of their mental health and by putting effort to do activities when things go out of hand.

Participant 1 mentioned that “I’m quite aware whenever I’m stressed or overwhelmed. I make sure that I will be de-stressing in any way that’s applicable to me. Self-awareness is also a key to self-care.”

Participant 2 shared these statements “I make a deliberate commitment to sustain my well-being. Therefore, I ensure that I dedicate time to engage in activities and employ strategies that support self-nurturing, stress reduction, relaxation, and overall personal health.”

Participant 4 shared how they managed their mental health: “Practice proper hygiene as much as possible. Spend time with loved ones, go on a vacation if time permits, food trip, watch drama series and anime, and sleep, listen to music.”

Participant 5 mentioned “I apply this (self-care) to myself by being self-monitoring especially when I am going beyond the limits of living a healthy lifestyle; then I try to self-regulate to go back to my equilibrium.”

Based on the statements by the participants, shows that they still value self-care and see it as an important part of their current lifestyle. They are aware of their status and are putting effort into finding ways in taking care of themselves. The statements given by the participants underscore how crucial self-care is for guidance counselors. They talk about the different tactics and pursuits they use to keep their mental health and well-being intact. Self-awareness of stress levels, relaxation, and stress-reduction activities, taking breaks, spending time with loved ones, vacations, maintaining good hygiene, watching dramas and anime, listening to music, and self-monitoring to maintain a healthy lifestyle are a few examples. The individuals actively work to put their well-being first and understand the importance of self-care.

**Theme 2. Ways of taking care of oneself**

The participants have their ways of taking care of themselves. However, one common area that has surfaced from their statements shows that all of them are aware and put effort into taking care of themselves.

Participant 1 shared to the researchers “I know when to take a rest and pause for a while. I tried to use my free time to do things that I like and/or do nothing.” Participant 2 mentioned “I practice self-care by indulging in activities I enjoy. I engage in physical exercise whenever possible, practice journaling, take leisurely walks, and occasionally treat myself to watching Netflix or dining alone.” Participant 3 told the researchers that it’s simply having a work-life balance. Participant 4 shared “Practice proper hygiene as much as possible. Haha Spend time with loved ones, go on a vacation if time permits, food trip, watch drama series and anime sleep, listen to music.” Participant 5 has shared “I start with the basics: trying to keep a balanced diet, regulating my sleep hygiene, maintaining social connections, devoting time for silence and solitude.”

Through their remarks, the participants shared how they manage their work-life balance and practice self-care. The significance of taking breaks and spending spare time doing things one enjoys is emphasized by Participant 1. Engaging in hobbies and pastimes including working out, keeping a notebook, taking strolls, binge-watching Netflix, and dining by themselves are some ways that Participant 2 takes care of herself. Work-life balance is important, according to Participant 3. Participant 4 highlights the importance of maintaining good hygiene, spending time with family and friends, taking travels, engaging in culinary adventures, watching anime and dramas, and enjoying music. A balanced diet, good sleep hygiene, fostering social relationships, and setting aside time for solitude and quiet are just a few of the fundamentals of self-care that Participant Number Five emphasizes.

These remarks all point to the significance of work-life balance and self-care. The participants understand how important it is to put their health first and partake in enjoyable and unwinding activities. They know that having a healthy work-life balance requires taking pauses, exploring personal interests, and participating in enjoyable activities. The participants also stress the importance of maintaining good hygiene, traveling, spending time with loved ones, engaging in hobbies, and attending to one's physical and mental health. The above quotations underscore how crucial self-care is for maintaining general well-being and recharging in both the personal and professional spheres of life.

### **Theme 3. A need for handling personal issues**

Results from 2023 have shown that the counselors still know that their issues are important to address and are still putting effort into ensuring that it doesn't carry over to

their work. However, one key detail that the researchers have noticed is that for the 2023 results, the participants seem to be more resilient in handling their setbacks.

Participant 2 stated “My concerns are something I strive to keep from affecting my work. However, if I ever feel that these concerns become too overwhelming and might hinder my performance, I consider taking a day off from work to address them. I believe that recognizing when I need a break is essential for maintaining my overall well-being and ensuring that I can return to work with a clear and focused mind. This approach helps me manage the impact of personal issues on my professional responsibilities and ensures I can continue to perform effectively.”

Participant 5 mentioned “Most setbacks I encounter occur at work and so they don't ‘affect’ my work as something external would, but rather they are essentially incidental to my work.” Participant 1 shared “I make sure that it doesn't affect my work. If I can't handle the situation, I usually ask someone else to take over or probably I pause or reschedule sessions and when I'm okay, I go back immediately. I'm not the type of person to deal with a problem for so long.”

The participant remarks provide insight into how they manage personal issues and obstacles in connection to their employment. While Participant 2 agrees that it's critical to prevent personal issues from interfering with work, they also understand when to take a day off if these issues become too much and are impeding performance. They think that to preserve general well-being and return to work with a clear and concentrated mind, knowing when to take a break is essential. Participant 5 notes that the majority of obstacles they face at work are incidental to their task rather than having an impact on it in the same way that external issues would. Participant 1 assigns assignments, reschedules meetings as needed, and makes sure that personal matters don't interfere with their job.

Participant 2 stresses the significance of keeping personal matters apart from work, but she also admits that if they begin to affect her performance, she must deal with them. They place a high value on taking time off to attend to these issues and give their general well-being top priority. By using this strategy, they may guarantee that they can continue to function well while managing the impact of personal concerns on their professional obligations. Participant 5 makes a distinction between obstacles that arise at work and outside variables that might have an impact on their job. They see these obstacles as incidental to their job, implying that they can get through them and move past them without suffering a major setback to their total output. When it comes to personal issues that might



interfere with their employment, Participant 1 is proactive. When anything goes wrong, they assign work or reschedule meetings so they can fix the issue and get back to work quickly. Their preference is to discover rapid answers rather than to ponder about issues for a long time.

#### **Theme 4. Confidants' role as guidance counselors**

Similar to the 2019 results, the participants do share their concerns with their confidants to help them deal with the setbacks that have occurred in their lives.

Participant 1 mentioned "I usually talk it out to someone. One way how I de-stress is by talking to my trusted persons. I'm quite vocal with my thoughts and emotions." Participant 2 shared "For me, it's essential to have a balance when dealing with problems. Some issues can be managed independently. However, when a problem becomes too burdensome, seeking support from someone who can listen and understand can be incredibly helpful. I believe in the importance of reaching out to trusted individuals when needed, as talking it out can often lead to solutions and emotional relief." Participant 4 told the researchers "As an introverted person, I usually keep to myself and find possible solutions immediately. But if things are going out of hand, I usually reach out to trusted people only." Participant 5 has mentioned, "Particular problems which I have in common with other people in that same particular situation, I do express and externalize."

To effectively cope with challenges, the research participants stress the value of communicating about their feelings and ideas and asking for help. They know that for their health, they must strike a balance between addressing problems on their own and asking for help when needed. Others may first remain to themselves and then ask for help when needed, while some participants would rather work things out with close friends or family. In this study, the participants share how they handle stress and issues. They stress the need to share their worries with reliable people who can offer them empathy, support, and possible answers. They understand how important it is to let go of their ideas and feelings to ease emotional loads, and they sometimes find that sharing experiences may be beneficial. Furthermore, several participants express their inclination towards self-directed problem-solving, but they also recognize the necessity of seeking assistance when problems become too much to handle.

**Theme 5. Human relationship as an integral part of life**

The participants still generally see human relationships as an integral part of their lives with Participant 5 saying “It’s capital for me. A lot of personal fulfillments come from healthy relationships with people.”

Participant 1 mentioned that “Human relationships are important to me. I tried to be available to those people who are important to me. Human relationships are part of our sense of belongingness need. I give importance to it by nourishing it through communication and my presence. But I also know when relationships become one-sided and toxic.” Participant 2 shared “I value human relationships as they play a crucial role in fostering harmony within our community. These connections make our lives meaningful and enrich our interactions.” Participant 3 told the researchers that “they value and respect the person”. Participant 4 shared to the researchers that “By continuously being open to new learning, updates in the field of my work, understanding the new trends, benchmarking with colleagues.”

The study's participants acknowledge the value of interpersonal connections in their lives. While they are conscious of the possibility of toxicity, they place a high importance on positive interactions, open communication, and presence in their relationships. They contend that meaningful interactions, communal peace, and personal fulfillment are all facilitated by human relationships. One participant also emphasizes the value of lifelong learning and maintaining current connections in their professional lives. The participants convey a common understanding of the value of interpersonal interactions. They stress how crucial it is to look after and preserve positive relationships with those who hold special meaning in their lives. They understand that interacting with people gives them a sense of fulfillment and belonging. The participants also recognize the necessity to set boundaries when needed and accept the possibility of harmful interactions.

The importance of interpersonal connections in building harmonious communities and stimulating exchanges is also emphasized by the participants. They are aware that these linkages foster meaningful interactions with people and are necessary for fostering harmony in their communities.

Moreover, an individual highlights the significance of ongoing education and being current in their work-related connections. They realize that to sustain fruitful professional relationships, it is important to remain receptive to new information, comprehend industry trends, and benchmark with peers.

The understanding of the significance of interpersonal interactions in a variety of spheres of life is the concept that comes through in these comments. The participants recognize the importance of having positive relationships with others in both personal and professional spheres for enriching interactions, community harmony, and personal fulfillment. To preserve wholesome and fruitful relationships, they also stress the need to set boundaries and lifelong learning.

In addition to the 5 themes identified from the 2019 results, the researchers also found new possible themes from the statements of the participants and asked them how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted them.

### **Theme 6. Cultivation of a resilient mind**

The participants have constantly mentioned that they manage their setbacks by being resilient or have acted in ways that show resilience.

Participant 5 has mentioned how they deal with their setbacks. "I guess I start by breaking down the finer elements of the situation, especially the background, the extent, and the gravity. Then I explore available options and needed resources to execute the best solution possible." This is also supported by Participant 1: "I try to look at different angles and maybe there's a good reason for it. I always try to understand the situations and look for other options."

Participant 2 shared "I navigate challenges by prioritizing self-care and cultivating a resilient mindset. I recognize that setbacks are a natural part of life's journey, not its entirety. I firmly believe in my ability to recover and have faith in the ongoing process of growth and adaptation. This means that I make sure to take care of my physical, mental, and emotional well-being, especially during tough times. Additionally, I maintain a positive outlook, understanding that setbacks are temporary hurdles, not permanent roadblocks. I trust in my resilience and remain open to the lessons and personal development that can arise from overcoming difficulties."

In addition, Participant 4 commented "Normally, just being resilient, self-reflect, and pray. Talk it out with trusted people," While Participant 3 added: "I think, it is more of being resilient. And I'm also telling myself to be more positive in difficult situations."

The participants provide a range of coping mechanisms for obstacles and disappointments encountered in daily life. They stress how crucial it is to prioritize self-care, develop a resilient mentality, consider other viewpoints, reflect on oneself, ask for

help from people you can trust, and have an optimistic attitude. To implement the best potential solution, Participant 5 evaluates the problem, weighs the possibilities, and gathers the required resources when faced with obstacles. Exploring other possibilities and comprehending the circumstances are also stressed by Participant 1. As someone who values resilience and self-care, Participant 2 views obstacles as short-term roadblocks that can pave the way for future success. Resilience, introspection, and asking for help from reliable people are the three things that Participant 4 looks to. In challenging circumstances, Participant 3 advocates resilience and keeping an optimistic outlook.

### **Theme 7. Being responsible for their well-being**

As guidance counselors, they are considered experts in the field of mental well-being, and it shows how they are actively putting effort into their self-care and ensuring that they apply it to themselves.

Participant 1 told the researchers “I’m quite aware whenever I’m stressed or overwhelmed. I make sure that I will be de-stressing in any way that’s applicable to me. Self-awareness is also a key to self-care.” Participant 2 shared “I make a deliberate commitment to sustain my well-being. Therefore, I ensure that I dedicate time to engage in activities and employ strategies that support self-nurturing, stress reduction, relaxation, and overall personal health.” Participant 3 told the researchers “I take a break, I do the activities that make me happy.” Participant 4 has mentioned “I always make sure to practice it (self-care) as much as possible to live a healthy and meaningful life. To have a good rest during weekends or if I have free time. Reward myself maybe with my comfort food or watch my favorite series. Participant 5 mentioned “I apply this (self-care) to myself by being self-monitoring especially when I am going beyond the limits of living a healthy lifestyle; then I try to self-regulate to go back to my equilibrium.”

The participants emphasize the value of stress management and self-care in preserving their well-being. They stress that to sustain a healthy lifestyle, one must be self-aware, make time for enjoyable and relaxing activities, and practice self-monitoring and self-regulation. The importance of recognizing one's stress and applying appropriate techniques to reduce it is emphasized by Participant 1. It is believed that developing self-awareness is essential to engaging in self-care. Participant 2 intentionally maintains their well-being by making time for practices and activities that promote stress management and self-nurturing. Asserting that self-care entails doing things that make one feel good,

participant 3 highlights the value of taking pauses and indulging in happy activities. Participant 4 highlights that self-care is essential to living a meaningful and healthy life. Self-care practices include taking time for relaxation, indulging in comfort food, and engaging in personal leisure activities. Participant 5 suggests using self-monitoring to keep within the bounds of a healthy lifestyle and self-regulation to regain equilibrium as needed. This demonstrates a proactive effort to preserve harmony and health.

### **Pandemic-related Themes**

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely impacted our ways of life. While the participants had different ways of addressing self-care during the pandemic and some of them reaffirmed on how important it was, a common theme that brewed from the discussion was how they have become more aware of the importance of human relationships and found new ways to maintain them.

### **Theme 8. Importance and Managing Human Relationships**

People's lives have been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic, including their views on relationships and self-care. In the face of uncertainty, their thoughts highlight the value of preserving relationships, savoring the present, and giving self-care priority.

Participant 5 mentioned, "It (Pandemic) didn't make an impact on the way I value relationships, but it did make me aware of the many ways and new ways of maintaining those relationships." Participant 2 shared "The pandemic has hit home the significance of relationships for me. It's a realization of how short and unpredictable life can be. I've come to understand that the connections we have with people we care about are truly priceless. It's taught me to treasure every moment with my loved ones, to be present, and to let them know how much they mean to me while I still have the chance." Participant 1 mentioned "I had a lot of realizations of how I built and sustain important relationships. Since my dad died last July 2020, it made me realize how important communication and little things are. How simple *kumustahan* can be a great deal to someone. The pandemic also taught me that not all people that you love can give the same amount of love, attention, and care to you the way you give it to them, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you are less loved and important to them. You just have different priorities.

Participant 4 told the researchers: “learn to be more aware of what’s happening around us, express how you value the person, learn to appreciate and be more grateful every day” as stated by Participant 3 “Do what makes you happy because you’ll never know what might happen every day.”

While the pandemic did not alter Participant 5 belief about the importance of relationships, it did increase their awareness of the several methods in which these ties might be maintained. Participant 2 highlights the importance of relationships in light of the epidemic, stressing the necessity to cherish each minute spent with loved ones and the unpredictable nature of life. Participant 1 discusses their insights about establishing and maintaining relationships, emphasizing the need for dialogue and simple acts of kindness. They also realize that while love and care may not be returned in the same manner by everyone, this does not make a person less valuable. Participant 4 offers the following advice: cultivate thankfulness, show others how much you appreciate them, and be conscious of your environment. Participant 3 highlights the value of seeking pleasure since it may be found in life. The participant’s remarks are indicative of their individual experiences and reactions to the challenges posed by the epidemic. Participant 5 knowledge of novel approaches to preserving relationships points to a willingness to change and come up with original solutions. The insight gained by Participant 2 on the transience of life emphasizes the need to set priorities and cultivate deep relationships. The observations of Participant 1 emphasize the significance of clear communication, acknowledging that everyone has different priorities, and appreciating the small gestures of checking in on others. The counsel offered by Participant 4 highlights the need to practice mindfulness, express thankfulness, and appreciate the people in our life. The viewpoint of participant 3 emphasizes how unpredictable life may be and how crucial it is to actively pursue pleasure.

### **Discussion**

The researchers were able to conclude that the guidance counselors also practice self-care by engaging in different activities of their interest. Individual differences of the counselors were shown in how they take care of themselves; as some would engage more in mindfulness to gain inner peace, while some would prefer watching films or traveling. As for Coaston (2017), counselors must achieve holistic awareness of taking care of themselves including body, mind, and spirit and one important consideration is to empower self-compassion and mindfulness to do self-care practices not only by simply having

enough sleep, doing exercise, and eating healthy foods. Self-care plays a vital role in the professional life of counselors. While there are numerous ways to tell how to do it, it still applies distinctively to different counselors. Brand (2019) categorizes self-care into four and the usual activities associated with it: emotional (yoga, mindfulness), physical (physical activities), mental (learning and further education), and social (quality time with significant people). These reduce the cause of burnout to school counselors resulting in better management of stress and burnout. Yoga found as an effective self-care strategy in relieving the effects of burnout and compassion fatigue (Atkinson, 2012; Murphy, 2013; Rocha et al., 2012; Valente & Marotta, 2005 as cited in Dixon, 2022 as cited in Brand, 2019). Findings by Montero-Díaz et al. (2019) that examined the relationship between self-care practices and mental health outcomes among helping professionals, including counselors, showed that there was a positive association between self-care and psychological well-being, which recommends self-care practices can indeed contribute to improved mental health for counselors.

Guidance counselors ensure that there is a boundary between their work and personal life. Counselors must offer the best counseling process possible and to do so, they need to practice self-care and have a positive life attitude. When they deal with their clients, they may feel the insecurity and frustration the latter feel, they need to do stress reduction and self-caring so they can continue to be the best at what they do. They need to know what will help them achieve these, maintaining a stress-free zone, and giving themselves time and attention. It may be through regular meditation, self-talk, or physical exercise; whatever activity it is—physical, mental, or emotional, must be included in the counselors' daily routine (Roland, 2009). They avoid bursting their emotions and feelings toward their counselee. Hence, their confidence is a great help in lessening the problems that they are dwelling on. Moreover, guidance counselors also apply emotion-focused coping by dealing with stresses that are beyond their control which includes various self-distraction activities like watching K-drama and televisions, and eating (Mababa & Fabella, 2023). On the other hand, Gallardo and Chavez (2022) found that the biggest stress reliever among the participants turned out to be social support. As a result, these meaningful relationships serve as a source of strength that aids and inspires the participants to succeed in all of their activities in life.

Human relationship is part of the guidance counselors' work and personal life. Thus, all of the participants see it as very important. Human relationships are not only

between them and their counselee, but also with friends, family, loved ones, and people in need of help. As Mababa and Fabella (2023) suggested in the face of increasing demands and stress associated with the pandemic, nurturing strong personal and professional relationships becomes paramount for mental health professionals. The studies also highlighted differences in how various healthcare professionals cope with the challenges they face. Guidance counselors were found to be more inclined to utilize coping strategies compared to the medical staff and professionals.

Given the unique and often intense challenges that healthcare workers face, they must prioritize self-care, both on a personal and professional level. Seeking support from friends, family, and peers is essential to sustain their well-being. The accounts of individual participants in these studies provide a more personal perspective on how mental health professionals cope with work-related stress and find support.

### **5-year follow-up**

After 5 years, the participants' opinions on self-care have remained the same. However, the researchers noticed that there had been changes in the characters of the participants. This led to the emergence of the three new themes.

The unfolding of theme 6 (Cultivation of a Resilient Mind) shows that the participants have seen the importance of cultivating resilience or the actions to resolve their setbacks. The researchers connect its emergence from the constant practice of self-care done by the counselors which had led to them seeing resilience as an important part of it. Positive feelings were contextualized as the outcome of internal causes, in particular self-care practices among guidance counselors, which have been shown to improve counselors' psychological well-being (Mahomed, 2020). It was further found that mindfulness-based self-compassion training can be effective in enhancing the emotional well-being of school counselors. The study reported there were increased levels of positive emotions and decreased levels of stress and anxiety among the participants (Lin et al., 2022).

Even in the 2019 discussion, the participants have already manifested how important self-care is and how they are generally putting effort into their well-being as shown in theme 7 (being responsible for their well-being). After 5 years, the consistency of their behavior toward being responsible for their well-being shows how important self-care is for them. This can be supported by the study of Venart, Vassos, and Pitcher-Heft (2007) recommended ways to improve physical, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal



flexibility. It said that wellness involves the creation and maintenance of personal and professional balance and prioritizing mental, physical, and spiritual health. Counselors should take responsibility for their own health to transform the wellness of clients and the counseling profession. Developing self-awareness and taking active steps towards enhanced personal wellness are musts.

The emergence of theme 8 that focuses on the importance and managing human relationships primarily came from the social changes brought about by the pandemic. As all of us were hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and have generally restructured how our society functions, the participants shared that they had an opportunity to appreciate and find ways to manage their relationships. The pandemic's effects on society had a big influence on the participants' views on relationships. Although the pandemic first weakened social ties and exacerbated feelings of loneliness, it also promoted a greater understanding of the value of relationships and inspired the participants to take charge of and fortify them (Tang et al., 2020). A study by Wang et al. (2021) showed that the pandemic exacerbated counselors' feelings of loneliness and disrupted social connections. The study did discover, though, that some counselors adjusted by using technology and coming up with fresh approaches to social interaction, underscoring the significance of maintaining relationships in challenging times. Moreover, Gibson et al. (2020) revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic made people rethink the value of interpersonal connections and relationships. This shows that people's understanding of the value of interpersonal interactions for general well-being may have increased as a result of the pandemic.

The initial results from 2023 have shown how the participants have improved at practicing their self-care. This can be shown by how they have seen the importance of cultivating a resilient mindset, and how consistently they are still responsible for their wellbeing. In addition, after being hit by the pandemic, the participants have gained a stronger sense of awareness towards the importance of their human relationships and have gained ways to manage and maintain them. This was also found in Gallardo and Chavez (2022) wherein social support was sought at work among their coworkers and, to a lesser extent, by their direct supervisor and the organization they are affiliated with, in the same manner they do in their personal lives.

In the realm of self-care, counselors need to embark on a journey of self-discovery. This entails embracing their own emotions and feelings, striving to find inner peace and tranquility, and tapping into their reservoirs of strength and support systems. By tending to

their well-being, counselors are not only better equipped to address the needs of their clients but also ensure their long-term sustainability and vitality in the field. Hall et al. (2023) emphasize that counselors who engage in self-exploration are more able to recognize their own needs and limits, which enhances their ability to practice self-care and increases their effectiveness as professional.

The future researcher that will tackle the issue of the quality of life of a guidance counselor, may use assessment to fully investigate the perspective on their profession, they can also create specific intervention programs to enhance their psychological wellness and reconsider the implication of self-care to other professions.

### **Reflexivity**

Doing this research has bolstered the researchers' feelings that they are still humans—prone to fatigue, burnout, and stress. It is not every day that people are in their best shape and behavior. The fact is, there are many challenges to one's effectiveness and wellness when dealing with clients, and practitioners have their own needs as well. As mental health professionals need to function—connect with, engage with, and care for our clients this takes a toll on us and leads to compassion fatigue and job burnout. When the practitioners themselves are stressed, distressed, or impaired, the clients suffer. We are unable to help them, unable to meet their needs, or we provide inadequate client care. We are vulnerable to personal life stressors as well as work stressors and these distract us from our work and we might not be able to effectively discharge our functions. It is in these stressful times that we need to have a wellness plan that encompasses our physical, psychological, mental, and social well-being.

We understand that we can only work effectively with our clients when we are fit—physically, psychologically, mentally, and even spiritually. Having this balance between our work and our personal life, which some refer to as work-life balance, can help. We realized that to maintain a personal and professional balance, we need to prioritize our mental, physical, psychological, and spiritual health. We can do this through stress reduction and self-caring, maintaining a stress-free environment, and having “me time”.

Whatever may be the reason for our loss of empathy, compassion, and zest as counselors, the fact remains that we can still be as effective as before despite these challenges. We can do that by focusing on ourselves also, particularly, by self-regulation. We can practice mindfulness daily, probably do yoga, go to the gym, talk to friends, read,

watch movies, take a leisurely walk, play with pets—the list goes on, whatever we feel like doing to relax. We can be as effective as before; we just need to find time for ourselves and de-stress.

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