

RESPONSE TO BURNOUT AND CARING FOR SELF BY THE PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS IN DELHI: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Manju Goel¹, Kannappa V Shetty² & Shaurya Prakash³

¹Regional Director, IGNOU Regional Centre, Khanna, Punjab. ²Assistant Professor, School of Social Work (SOSW), Section H, Block 15, IGNOU, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi: 110068. ³Assistant Professor, Programme of Social Work, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Assam down town University, Guwahati, Assam.

Correspondence: Manju Goel, e-mail: manjugoel@ignou.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Background: Nowadays, because of demanding and challenging work life, counsellors experience stress, resulting in burnout. **Methods and Materials:** The present study was conducted with counsellors working in the Delhi NCR, and the data were gathered using an interview guide. **Results:** It was found that the professional counsellors know the importance of self-care, but still face burnout. The study's respondents cited many reasons for their inability to care for their physical and emotional well-being, like too much caseload and demands to meet the technologically associated tasks without any other helping hand. Counsellors experienced feelings of frustration and an unpleasant level of stress. They recommended that the counsellors be given a dedicated time for the mindfulness activities, relaxation exercises, and meditation in their job profile schedules. **Conclusion:** It was discussed and realized that the client's and counselor's well-being and wellness are crucial.

Keywords: Burnout, self-care, stress, well-being, emotional intelligence, mindfulness.

Submitted: 19.08.2025 **Revised:** 01.10.2025 **Accepted:** 27.10.2025 **Published:** 28.01.2026

How to cite this article: Goel, M., Shetty, K. V., & Prakash, S. (2025). Response to burnout and caring for self by the professional counsellors in Delhi: A qualitative study. *Indian Journal of Health Social Work*, 7(2), 35-41.

INTRODUCTION

Burnout is very common among counsellors. Listening to the problems of others throughout the day, and dealing with really difficult cases often makes counsellors prone to burnout. Counsellors face challenging conditions in order to meet the demanding needs of work. Burnout results in fatigue, pessimism, and emotional weakness. The person facing

burnout cannot manage the expectations of self and others. They feel helpless in shouldering the new responsibilities and their routine work. In any situation, on any day or time, the counselors extend help to the needy and troubled clients. It is natural to be under stress when you are performing the role of caring for distressed people. Listening to the

traumas experienced by the clients also puts the counsellors under tension. Helping a client suffering from life disturbances can also cause disturbances in the counselor's life. This situation is not new to a person whose profession is caring for people in need.

The prerequisite for a professional counsellor is to realize the importance of self-care. All the professional counsellors are well acquainted with the significance of self-care. The counselors know the principle of help yourself first, but many times this is not practiced by the counselors. It is a known fact that if we invest all our energy in dealing with the client and nothing comes back into restock the energy of the counsellor, then the counsellor will suffer from physical and mental fatigue. Hence, it is essential for the counsellors to care for self. Wellness of both the client and counsellor is indispensable.

The burnout and self-care suggested that, generally, counsellors work in an atmosphere of one-way caring. The client also did not realize the mental health status of the counsellors and expected a great level of emotional support from the counsellors (Guy, 2000; Skovholt et al., 2001). In order to create an empathetic environment for the client, the counsellors neglected their own mental health and well-being needs (Skovholt et al., 2001; Barnett et al., 2007). As the client's well-being progressed, the counsellors often neglected their well-being (Barnett et al., 2007). Self-care was the last option on the to-do list of the counsellors, but it should have been the priority. Self-care was central to a helping career. The therapists also suggested caring for oneself should be a priority for mental health care professionals and counsellors. Caring for the self-prevented the negative outcome of burnout for the mental health care professional (Guy, 2000; Barnett et al., 2007; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- ◆ To understand the physical and emotional conflicts faced by the professional counsellors.
- ◆ To describe the burnout issues confronted by the professional counsellors.
- ◆ To find out the strategies adopted by the professional counsellors to respond to burnout and for self-care.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research design of the study on response to burnout and caring for self was descriptive in nature. The data was collected through qualitative research methods and tools. In this study, the researcher interviewed the 60 counsellors working in Delhi NCR with the help of an interview guide. The interview guide consisted of eight points, i.e., open-ended statements. A purposive sampling technique was used in the selection of the respondents. The counsellors working in Integrated Testing and Counselling Centres (ICTC), Prevention from Parent to Child.

Transmission centres (PPTCT), Sexually Transmitted Infections/ Reproductive Tract Infections (STI/RTI) clinics, Anti retro Viral Therapy (ART) centres, Tuberculosis (T.B.) care counsellors comprised the sample of the present study. The analysis of the data was done using descriptive scripts of the statements given by the respondents.

RESULTS

The findings of the study were thematically organized under eight themes-

- ◆ Dissatisfaction from the job
- ◆ Feeling of physically and emotionally drained
- ◆ Feeling of frustration
- ◆ Feeling of isolation –Have no one to talk
- ◆ Feeling of neglected at work-place by the co-workers
- ◆ Feeling of taking wrong decision to be

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in a particular organisation

- ◆ Feeling of unpleasant level of stress and failures
- ◆ Strategies adopted by the counsellors in caring for the self

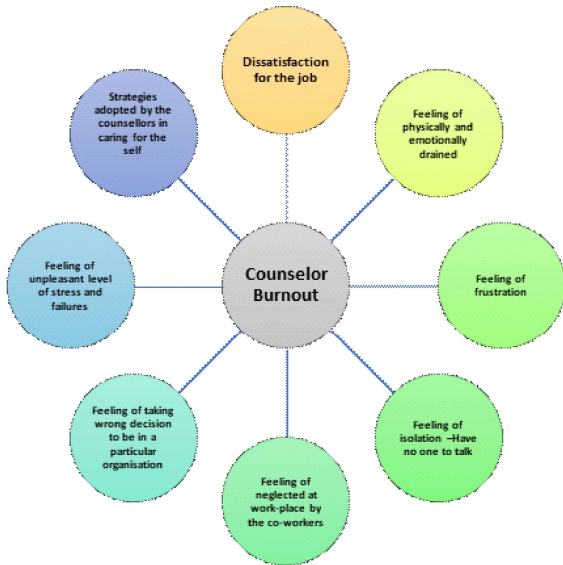


Figure 1: Counselor Burnout

Profile of the respondents

The respondents of the study were the professional counsellors practicing counselling in Delhi NCR. They were practicing counselling at ICTC, PPTCT, STI/RTI clinics, ART centres, and TB care centres across all the districts of Delhi NCR. All the respondents were post-graduates in the Psychology discipline. A total number of respondents interviewed was 60.

Age and Gender

Table 1 reflects those 29 respondents belonged to the age group of 35-45 years. 25 respondents belonged to the age group of 25-35 years, while 6 respondents belonged to the age group of 45-55 years. The study represents almost equal representation of male (33) and female (27) respondents.

Table 1: Age and Gender.

Age	No. of Respondents		Total
	Male	Female	
25-35	14	11	25
35-45	15	14	29
45-55	4	2	6
Total	33	27	60

Counselling Experience

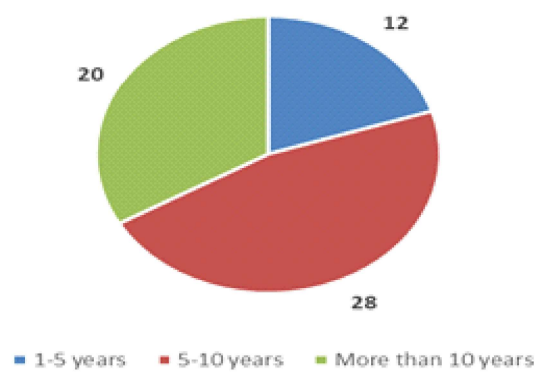


Figure 2: Counselling Experience.

Experience of Counsellors in Counselling

Figure 2 depicts the data on the experience of counsellors in counselling. The findings reflected that 20/60 respondents were practicing counselling for more than 10 years, 28/60 respondents were practicing counselling for the past 5 years, while 12 respondents were practicing counselling for the past 2 years.

Dissatisfaction from the job

The respondents were asked whether they were happy with their job or not, and the level of dissatisfaction. Most of the respondents (45/60) stated that there was a feeling of dissatisfaction. They did not see a correlation between the level of their work and the satisfaction they achieved from that work.

The reasons cited by them reflected that too much of a case load, being engaged in too much paperwork, and technology made a few things easy, but it also increased the work pressure. One of the respondents said, "*Easy access to WhatsApp messages connected the client with the counsellors, making the counselling process easy, but that created a lot of tension in the life of a counsellor. It was difficult to practice saying no to clients for WhatsApp messages.*"

Feeling of physically and emotionally drained
The feeling of physical and emotional exhaustion arises when someone is stressed and unable to manage their personal and work life. The person faced burnout, and their level of patience decreased. They did not like to spend time with friends and family. They experienced irritation all the time. The respondents (36/60) of the study revealed that many times they experienced irritation and did not like to talk to anyone. They felt apathy and did not enjoy the company of friends and family. In a study conducted by Schaufeli et al. (2023), Counsellors complained of fatigue, mental exhaustion, and disturbed thoughts to an extent that they could not manage their emotions properly in daily routine tasks and interactions. Another study conducted by Awa et al. (2010) analysed how stress related to counselling work affects counselors' emotional and physical health. However, it is not necessary that the same stress would cause burnout.

Feeling of frustration

A person may experience the feeling of frustration when they constantly do not perform well and achieve something. The respondents (24/60) stated that sometimes they felt frustrated and confused. They experienced forgetfulness, difficulty in concentration, and loss of memory. Other respondents (36/60) did not experience such health issues as they were engaged in regular

exercise and physical fitness.

Feeling of isolation –Have no one to talk

When someone encounters stress, the feeling of loneliness and isolation emanates naturally. Physical and emotional exhaustion affected the relationship with the family members and also with friends. The respondents (30/60) of the study expressed their limited ability to maintain relationships with their family members and friends. They experienced that they had no one to talk to and share their life challenges. They felt that no one wanted to maintain a social relationship with them. The respondents faced low self-esteem and a lack of zeal to do any work. One of the respondents cited, "*A few years back, I felt lonely, that was my problem, and I did not speak to anyone about it. I doubted that the family members liked me, and I had to help myself. The negative feeling of loneliness overpowered me many times, I constantly tried to fight against the feeling of isolation.*"

Feeling of neglected at work-place by the co-workers

The feeling of being neglected/ignored at the workplace was traumatic for many people. Was the feeling of neglect by the co-workers genuine, or was the manipulation of one's own thoughts a matter of concern? It was important to have a feeling of job satisfaction and job involvement. The respondents (27/60) agreed that they had experienced ignorance by their teammates on many occasions. They talked to the people who mistreated them or did not talk much with them at the workplace. But nothing changed; they had experienced the feeling of neglect by their co-workers.

Feeling of taking wrong decision to be in a particular organisation

The feeling of working with the wrong organisation arises when someone faces low self-esteem and a low level of confidence.

Many times, one felt that they were in the wrong profession. The study's respondents (30/60) felt that they had faced this problem of being in the wrong organisation, as it was very difficult for them to manage their personal and work life efficiently. Few of them (15/60) said that they tried to leave the job, but because of financial insecurities, they did not leave the job. One of the respondents stated, "*Being the single earner in the family, he could not take the decision to change the organisation or leave the job.*" In a study conducted by Turner and Rankine (2024), it was found that counsellors were unintentionally unable to recognize the symptoms of burnout faced by them. As a result, self-care has also been neglected. The study pointed out that personal as well as organizational factors created chaos in the life of the counsellors, which resulted in burnout being faced by the counsellors, recognized at a very late stage.

Feeling of an unpleasant level of stress and failures

Feeling of Stress and failures were associated. Increased work demands at the workplace lead to interpersonal conflicts, feelings of being ostracized, and mistreatment by teammates. The respondents (24/60) shared that workplace mistreatment shattered their confidence. They had faced the physical and emotional fatigue. Many times, they had difficulty falling asleep. And some of them (9/60) said they had overslept the day and night. One of the respondents said, "*When we were not able to complete the tasks, some of the staff members made mockery, which gave a bad feeling and sense of hopelessness.*"

Strategies adopted by the counsellors in caring for the self

Dealing with physical and emotional exhaustion was very important. People experiencing physical and emotional

exhaustion underwent a significant conflict between their personal and work lives. They needed to take care of their physical and emotional energy level and recharge them on time. The respondents were asked to suggest strategies to be adopted by the counsellors for caring for themselves.

The respondents (45/60) highlighted the fact that increased work pressure resulted in increased stress and caused job dissatisfaction. Hence, the respondents suggested being assertive in saying no to overwork and taking too many extra assignments. However, the counsellors (36/60) revealed that increased case-loads were not under their control. However, they suggested that for the digital (computer-data entry) work, a helping hand could be given to the counsellors. One of the respondents commented, "*The task of counselling a client was okay, but doing the entry of counselling data in the computer made us tired.*"

All the respondents suggested being cautious to maintain their physical and emotional energy levels. They said that the client and counsellor both needed to understand the value of regular exercise and meditation. The present study reflected that the respondents who were engaged in regular exercise and physical fitness did not experience any difficulty. Hence, it stressed that physical exercises also help maintain mental health.

It was also recommended by the respondents (45/60) that vacations were essential to spend time with family and friends and to have some rest. In order to reduce the level of stress, time management was needed. If a person were organized with their daily activities, personal and professional, it would reduce their stress level. The respondents (36/60) realized that spending time for weekly leisure activity was again of an utmost importance. One could paint, read, garden, play musical instruments, watch movies, go on a picnic, and spend time with pets.

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Maintaining social relationships was highlighted as vital by many respondents (42/60). They stated that no one can live happily in isolation. A healthy and positive relationship with the team workers should be encouraged. Working in cooperation and coordination with the team members reduced the stress.

The feeling of frustration triggers many associated health problems like aggression, depression, and anxiety. The respondents (48/60) reflected on the necessity to take care of their emotional intelligence. Recognizing and noticing the feeling and understanding that the feelings were fleeting, so need to respond appropriately and empathetically.

The respondents (30/60) responded that they understand the value of active mindfulness exercises, but practicing to live in the present moment was difficult because of multi-tasking job requirements. In a study conducted by Hardiman and Simmonds (2012), self-care was expressed as one of the difficult tasks by the counsellors. They found it difficult to balance the equilibrium of caring for themselves while caring for clients. While another study conducted by Patsiopoulos and Buchanan (2011) stressed the need for better self-awareness and observing the physical and emotional changes and challenges the counselors face.

They said that enjoying nature and doing breathing exercises or muscle relaxation exercises were some mindfulness activities, but it was tough to practice. However, counsellors must take time out of their busy schedules for mindfulness activities. The respondents suggested that some time period should be dedicatedly allotted in their job profiles for the relaxation exercise.

CONCLUSION

From the findings and analysis, it can be concluded that the counsellors were well aware of the reasons for burnout and how to respond to burnout. However, practicing self-

care was missing from their routine. They cited many reasons for being unable to care for themselves, overworking, a lack of quality time for family and self, and a lower priority on self-care. They recognized the changes in their mood, attitude, and thinking because of the stressful situations, but ignored the condition of not being well. It was realized that frustration tolerance was important; one needed to know how to deal with the frustration. Coping with emotions and challenging situations comes with the ability to deal with the frustration. If someone got irritated and distressed easily even on small tasks, then it needed to be dealt with empathetically. The physical and emotional turbulences counselors face could be responded to well if they developed emotional intelligence. Counsellors should be cautious of mindfulness in order to gain physical and emotional energy and deal with burnout situations. When one started understanding positively and appreciating the things around the environment, life became easy and full of optimistic energy.

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- Conflict of interest:** None
Role of funding source: None