

# Group Counseling Intervention in Enhancing Emotional Stability of Firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia: Case Study

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## Abstract

Group counseling intervention is able to enhance emotional stability among adults, especially those serving in the challenging circumstances of uniformed organizations. This study intends to explore the application of group counseling intervention among firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia undergoing training for promotion purposes. The objectives of this study are to: a) examine factors that cause emotional instability among firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia, and b) examine the application of group counseling intervention to enhance emotional stability among firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia. This research was conducted using the qualitative descriptive case study design approach. Data collection was done through a focus group comprising 20 firefighters who were undergoing a course for promotion purpose. Five group counseling interventions totaling 16 hours were done a marathon session in three day. Research findings indicate that group counseling intervention is able to help reduce stress and increase emotional stability of firefighters participating in the course. The opportunity to share their feelings, and extend emotional support among group members contributed to the fostering of emotional stability within the group.

**Key words:** group counseling intervention, emotional stability, stress, case study, Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia

## Introduction

The role of human resources within an industry or organization is one of the most crucial aspects that enables the organization to function in an optimum manner and achieve its targeted goals. Human resources that constantly are plagued by personal issues, conflicts and living conditions frequently give rise to stress, problems between employer and employee, declining work performance and communication breakdown, be it among the staff themselves, or with management, causing human resource to fail in playing their role effectively [1]. This leads to other more serious issues, as workers having this problem usually are less focused on their job, are absent from work more frequently, fall sick often, and are prone to many mistakes, among others [2]. This situation leads to these staff requiring assistance in terms of counseling services from the organization, as this can affect their efficiency and productivity, thus jeopardizing the overall quality of the organization. Therefore organizations today, be it public or private sector, are very much in need of counseling services for their staff. Also, employees, ranging from top management to lower ranking staff, persistently encounter problems in the workplace.

Research conducted by [3] report that emotional stability has a huge impact on individuals working in the nursing vocation, as they are entrusted with the task of taking care of patients' safety. This study clarifies that other than work experience, the unstable emotions of employees can have repercussions on their behavior, thus threatening the safety of patients under their care. Research by [4], points out that in the United States, guidance and counseling services have been provided for staff, especially among large and well-known companies. This service is becoming increasingly important due to a number of reasons, including economic instability, trust deficit of national industries, and various negative, perplexing matters that distress the mind and lead to stress. As such, professional counseling processes can aid employees to face these challenges and resolve issues that often weigh heavily on their minds.

Counseling services that begin from the educational environment are becoming increasingly significant in society today. The need of counseling in society is becoming more important because society is now aware that this service is able to enhance wellbeing. Counseling service is unique in that it is the clients who make the decision for themselves upon obtaining an understanding the problem they are facing. It is based on the principle and concept of 'helping service' which has its main objective of bringing wellbeing to the client, besides restoring the physical, mental and emotional aspects to stability [5].

Group counseling is defined as a dynamic form of treatment that is utilized by the therapist, whereby it is found to be effective in escalating change and growth in various sectors of the population [6]. [7] and [8], in their research, declared that group counseling had successfully diminished stress experienced by working adults and has been proven to elevate job satisfaction, especially among members of uniformed organizations [9]. Studies have been conducted by [9] and associates on police personnel who had experienced trauma due to fighting terrorists, resulting in emotional disturbances. In an experimental study, application of group counseling intervention was found to reduce trauma and enhance the emotional stability of these officers. This highlights that group counseling has assisted members of uniformed bodies to carry out their duties in a better state of mind. In this study, researchers proved the efficacy of group counseling, that was done using an eclectic approach in helping police personnel who experienced stress as a result of combating terrorists.

Other than that, group counseling acts to help members of a group in raising self-esteem, whereby changes can be witnessed in the form of behavior modification [9]. [10] meanwhile explain that group counseling is a process to learn new ways, besides interacting with people around them and exchanging viewpoints and experiences regarding a particular matter. Each of them held different roles within the group and

every one of them forwarded their responses for the view of others, thus driving the group forward.

According to [10], group counseling that occurs among group members and counselors results in attention of the counselor to be dispersed to all members present. The threat and insecurity of the group members are being addressed by the counselor. Subsequently the situation makes group members feel threatened and less secure because they have to share issues that are being discussed with other members. Subsequently the process that happens throughout the session originates from the counselor and other group members, and the counselor's function may shift from group leader to that of just a member. Another characteristic in group counseling can be seen in the numbers, which are slightly higher compared to group guidance, but of course far more than individual counseling, and the group leader needs to possess the necessary training and knowledge in managing the group.

This method of counseling can help participants express their feelings, give emotional support while calming them, improve ties between employer and employee, facilitate staff to upgrade their communication skills within the organization, and boost productivity in line with the goals that are to be achieved [11]. Counseling services are not just limited to staff with problems, but also cater for those who wish to acquire information and also share their stories and experiences. Additionally, interaction during counseling is extremely important and multi-faceted, causing each individual within a group to have the chance to play the role of recipient and provider in the sharing of information, and in the resolution of problems [9]

Briefly stated, group counseling is a service that helps a group of individuals who are experiencing similar problems by enabling them to share their feelings about it. As such, the objective of this study is to examine factors that influence emotional instability of firefighter's during training for promotions. The other aim is to alter behavior patterns of individuals by means of group counseling so that they can achieve a sense of wellbeing, while retaining the newly-found changes in their behavior. In other word, this article intends to study whether group counseling intervention that is conducted, with particular regards to the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia, is able to increase emotional stability among its members during their tenure of service.

### **Objective of the research**

This study would to examine factors that cause emotional instability among members of the fire department. Also it intends to study the application of group counseling intervention in increasing the emotional stability among firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia in the town of Kuala Kubu Bharu.

### **Research Objectives**

1. Examine factors that contribute to emotional instability among firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia
2. Examine the application of group counseling interventions in resolving emotional instability issues among members of the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the factors that lead to emotional instability among members of the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia?
2. How far has the application of group counseling intervention in the resolving of emotional instability issues among members of the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia succeeded?

## Research Methodology

This research was conducted using the descriptive qualitative approach. A case study design was adopted and sampling of study participants was done by purposive sampling. Data collection in this study utilized the focus group involving 20 firefighters who were undergoing a course for promotion purposes. The study respondents consisted of 20 firefighters from the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia in Kuala Kubu Bharu attending a promotion course. The age of respondents in this study ranged from 29 to 54 years. Out of the 20 respondents, only two of them were lady officers, with one of them being married with a child, while the other was still single. All respondents had a minimum of six years of experience in firefighting. The respondents were from various states from all over Malaysia.

The research participants were divided into four groups, with each group comprising five members. Members chose their groups voluntarily. The leader of (facilitating) the counseling group consisted as master counseling students in third semester who were performing their internship. Each group lead (facilitating) by one master level student. The group leader had been given training using the group counseling module that was used in this study.

The group counseling intervention was done in five sessions, a total of 16 hours over a span of three days. These five counseling sessions represented five stages, namely, rapport building stage, transitional stage, therapeutic stage, cooperation stage, and terminating stage. The time taken by each group in every stage was not the same for each group due to factors of group dynamics, involvement levels of group members and also the group leadership.

The 16-hour recorder of the sessions recordings by video were transcribed in verbatim. Two research assistants prepared and went through the transcript data of the interviews, as well as the recordings of the group counseling sessions conducted in this study. The research data was then analyzed using Nvivo 11 software, taking into account the type of theme that emerged. The coding process, according to themes, and references to the literature.

## Research Findings

Data analysis of factors that contributed to emotional instability among firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia shows that four main themes had emerged. These four themes are: i) family factor ii) health and age factor iii) mobile phone usage factor iv) preparedness factor. However, there was also data that portrayed positive aspects that existed within respondents throughout the promotion course and also during their years of service in firefighting and rescue.

### Family Factor

Feelings of anxiety, worry and fear were experienced because the emotions that haunted respondents mostly were related to family as they had to be away from them for six months. According to a firefighter from Group 1, it was difficult to sleep every night due to thinking about the children back home. This respondent had been home every night before this, to ensure that the children were well. It was also stated by this respondent regarding missing the children and this indirectly contributed to feelings of unhappiness.

“criticism and disturbances during this course is because of the family. The family that I had left behind. I feel very anxious thinking of the family back home. Deep anxiety. Every night thinking of the children. When I go back every night, the kids would embrace me, when I reach, they hug me. Whether the kids are healthy ... whether they had eaten ... it's a little difficult” (AKK1D)

Feeling anxious for the family, especially children, was experienced by a portion of the firefighters in this study, particularly when the location of the family residence was

in large cities, and far away from the place where they were undergoing training. Their experiences at work as firefighters caused them to frequently consider their children's safety, be they male or female, and particularly if they were teenagers.

"The first time I was a recruit in 1995, at that time I was still a bachelor. At that time when we're bachelors, we don't think about any problems yet. Now we think a lot about our family. What will happen to them when we are not around ... my family resides in Kuala Lumpur, a big city with high risks with all its crime. Its social woes. Like you mentioned, daughters, just like with me ... I have daughters ... have a son who is growing up". (AKK3E)

According to a segment of these research participants, they were constantly looking out for the safety of their children earlier, till they had to attend the promotion course, causing them to feel very anxious if they did not get information regarding the security of their children. The feeling of responsibility as a parent triggered feelings of anxiety, more so when their spouse worked at night, leaving the children without adult supervision. The issue of the training management not allowing them to use mobile phones also made family safety a worrying and disturbing concern for the firefighters.

"If at home we can watch TV, can chat, can socialize, that's how it is. When we are here ... the social aspect is curtailed. We are more into activities that have been planned. So, for me, this is certainly a problem. Because each of us has responsibilities. We have our families. Whether they are far ... near ... like in my case they are far away. It is really disturbing". (AKK1C)

"If I want to say no stress, there is indeed stress for my children when my husband goes for night work, the four children are left alone ... I don't know, to earn a living is really difficult, when we have got it, we have to hold on to it properly. Even if it means sacrifices on the family". (AKK2E)

### **Health and Age Factor**

The theme of health and age appears when firefighters in this research exceeded 54 years of age. Feelings of dissatisfaction arise when participants in this study feel that they are not capable of following the scheduled training, especially for those who are beginning to show early symptoms of certain diseases. However, a number of research participants declared that they still made efforts to carry out their scheduled training according to their ability. Even so, they still hoped that the training schedule would take into account their age and health, which was not the same as that of younger officers

"Threatened in terms of health and so on". (AKK1A)

"in terms of training ... this training ... health ... this age factor ... age factor. We are ... recruits for the second time. (AKK4D)

"health factor ...but still what we can do, we will do". (AKK3B)

### **Factor of Mobile Phone Usage**

In this research, all participants expressed dissatisfaction with very limited use of mobile phones that considerably limited communication with families throughout their training duration. The consequence of this was that they lost focus and were assailed by anxiety with what was going on, with regards to their families. All research participants admitted that the rule on usage of mobile phones was not a new one, as it existed in every one of their promotion courses, but it was not easy to accept this rule. According to them, modification of this regulation was appropriate to be done, taking into account its suitability in current times.

"So, at times we can't contact our children to ask them to lock up the house, to wake them up for school". (AKK2E)

"I feel disappointed with the usage of phones not being allowed ... because only at certain times is the usage of handphones permitted". (AKK1B)

### Self-Preparedness Factor

The factor of self-preparedness is the final factor contributing to emotional instability among firefighters. For those officers who had the self-preparedness to follow through with the course, they considered the training as making them happy and that each activity in the course was fun. For one officer in the second group, the course was seen as something that was necessary for career development as a firefighter. As such, the course was seen as one that carried sweet memories.

"Before I came, I thought this course that we are doing was like what I had experienced the second time. I look upon it as an entertainment ... this activity". (AKK1D)

"My career began as a senior fire officer, and now it is my career, and it is a sweet career, to be in the fire department service". (AKK2B)

*In this study, the factor of self-preparedness with regards to carrying out the same activities repeatedly has caused some participants to feel bored. There are also activities that do not present challenges, or are just too familiar for them, causing them to feel that attending the course was just a waste of time. They would feel better if the activities in the course were new ones that challenged them. The attitude of willingness to learn and try out new things would enable them to develop their credibility. On top of that, the discussion activities that were the same during the training did not provide avenues for them to gather new information and skills.*

"This is most boring. For instance, foot drills, don't tell me we need to do it again when we already know how. So maybe we can do something different. We do new things, we will feel more motivated. Those things that we do not know, we can learn and find out". (AKK1C)

"But actually, there is a little stress other than family, like our friends who speak about common things that we underwent and repeat the same things. Stuff that we underwent 15 years ago. I believe all here have experienced tragic times as recruits. We motivate as a group, and when we come here, we do the same thing". (AKK2C)

"My feelings ... stress is of course there, not anticipating that it would be like this. Throughout the earlier courses, we felt more proud. As pioneers, this becomes a stress". (AKK3A)

Attending the course with misgivings because of the experiences of the promotion process before this, feelings of unhappiness before coming for the course, and workplace pressure have all increased emotional instability among the participants of this study.

"In the firefighting service, what was most distressing was when I was promoted and it was very saddening ... the list was out but the finalist was not named". (AKK2D)

"Just thinking ... morning despondent, noon despondent, evening despondent". (AKK4E)

"Stress won't simply go away and not return, right? Maybe tomorrow, tonight, day after tomorrow, this stress will come back. It is only how we handle it. To date, we have been here for two months and there have been various types of stress that we have gone through". (AKK1B)

### Group counseling intervention applications increasing emotional instability among firefighters

The second research finding is the exploring of group counseling intervention applications effect on increasing emotional stability among firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia, which has yielded three main themes. The three main themes are group counseling: i) enables sharing of problems, ii) aids in solving of problems, and iii) increases emotional stability. The participants in this study gave

differing answers regarding group counseling intervention applications that they had participated in.

### **Enables sharing of problem.**

Based in analysis of four groups, the answer that was frequently received was that counseling was an activity that offered an opportunity to share problems and also to express feelings in order to lighten the problems that they encountered. Three quarters (75%) of research participants, when they shared problems and expressed their feelings during group counseling, were able to lessen the stress that they were going through. However difficult the problem faced, when they conversed with their colleagues, there was a sense of relief and consequently an increase in emotional stability.

“and what I understand about group counseling, is actually we talk ... talk so that we can express what is within us so as to reduce stress. That is what I feel”. (AKK1A)

“Then this group counseling ... share ... share something. We share together whatever problem that is burdening us”. (AKK2B)

“And group counseling, we bring out our feelings, if we have problems ... to our friends. My family at home is like this ... like this ... like this ... we can talk of our problems with others”. (AKK4C)

“ From this expression, stress can be overcome”. (AKK1D)

### **Aids in solving of problems.**

In this study too, research participants admitted that group counseling intervention at a cooperative level had helped them to collectively find ways to resolve problems that were shared in the group. They also said that the dynamics among themselves eventually led them to identify strategies for reducing their stress and emotional instability.

“Group counseling ... it's like that. We sit in a group, we try to settle all our problems”. (AKK1D)

“What I understand about group counseling is we discuss together what we are stressed about, find the best solution to overcome this stress”. (AKK2C)

### **Increases emotional stability**

Research findings also discovered that participants' emotions became increasingly stability and they felt at ease after going through the five group counseling sessions. The response of participants after all sessions were concluded was extremely positive, as they were able to share experiences about all issues that arose among themselves. For them, the group members also always provided support and motivation, as the problems they faced were basically the same ones. The following are some statements that were forwarded by respondents after going through the five group sessions.

“But actually there is no real stress. When we hear people talking about all sorts of things, the stress somewhat becomes less. Maybe about 90% of the stress reduces”. (AKK1D)

“Usually there is stress when we are bored ... if there is something, there is no stress. Currently it is not boring, when something is going on, there is no stress”. (AKK2C)

“I have a little reduction after expressing feelings, as you stated just now, of course there are times we are stressed. And opinions of how to manage this stress, it is not always that we are stressed”. (AKK4E)

Even so, there are also participants who said that they had misunderstood the need for, and the function of group counseling. There were some amongst them who felt that group counseling was an advisory service that was carried out by counselors in a

certain government department of public sector. The fact remains that counseling is not an advisory service as stated. There were also those who opined that group counseling served to resolve problems within a certain group. According to them, after undergoing group counseling for 16 hours, they began to understand the function of group counseling, especially in terms of enhancing their emotional stability. The reason for this could be lack of clarity regarding the group counseling that they had participated in prior to this.

"counselor, it's ok ... nowadays these counselors are already in government departments. Of course, it's all a function of advisory services, right?". (AKK2D)

"Ok ... for this group counseling ... to me, it is very good. When there are problems that we go through ... we will share together". (AKK1B)

Hence, based on research findings, overall it can be described that family factor, health factor, mobile phone usage factor, and the factor of self-preparedness are the factors that pose a threat to emotional stability of firefighters undergoing promotion courses. Data in this research also highlighted that group counseling intervention is capable of enhancing the emotional stability of firefighters by means of sharing their problems and feelings, and by providing an avenue for expressing feelings so that together, they could find the best remedies to minimize the stress that they were experiencing.

### Research Discussion

The issue of emotional instability that has been encountered among staff in an organization has long become a subject of study throughout many countries. In this research, family factor, health factor, mobile phone usage factor and the factor of self-preparedness were the factors that were jeopardizing the emotional stability of firefighters. These factors subsequently resulted in them not being able to achieve wellbeing in their lives to the extent of creating various other conflicts, besides affecting their duties. [Wainwright and Calnan \(2002\)](#) have also suggested that work pressure faced by individuals affects their health, their attendance at work and thus has negative repercussion on the organization. Due to this multitude of problems that arise among employees, there is a need for counseling within the work organization.

Research by [12] explains that within a successful organization, the factor of stress cannot be avoided in work situations. Her research depicts that stress occurs when there is a need to fulfil the objectives of the organization. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the employer to assist them in handling stress by providing counseling service at the workplace. This becomes even more necessary, given the rapid transformation of the economic and social aspects of the country, which presents the society greater challenges to withstand these developments. This situation will put more pressure on employees to fulfil the goals that have been determined by organizations, besides maintaining high standards at work.

According to [13] counseling at the workplace is generally effective in curbing depression and worry among employees who suffer from these maladies when they avail themselves of the counseling services offered. Additionally, according to some studies, counseling services at workplace can also bring down worker absenteeism rate in an organization, and has the positive effects on both job satisfaction as well as commitment towards performing their duties. This clearly shows that counseling services can indeed bring about a positive change among employees in fulfilling the objectives of the organization.

In this study, it has been proven that group counseling intervention carried out among officers of the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia in Kuala Kubu Bahru, who were undergoing promotion course, has been successful in increasing their emotional stability. Group counseling has opened up opportunities and avenues for stress relief of firefighting officers undergoing almost six months training for promotion purposes, thereby increasing their emotional stability. According to [9], group counseling intervention has given the opportunity to help uniformed officers share and



express their feelings, leading them to experience lowered levels of stress after this intervention.

This study also proves that group counseling intervention is one of the interventions that can be implemented in firefighting organizations in order to help them attain a state of overall wellbeing. Studies by [14] also found that organizational group counseling, either in government or private sector, was able to assist in enhancing the wellbeing of employees. This was due to the fact that employees in various levels of management, be it top, middle or lower management, experienced issues while performing their work. The problems that surfaced with great frequency, and is constantly faced by

employees are: conflict between employer and employee, pressure at work, breakdown in communication, and other social problems. The creation of counseling services within an organization can help employees to unravel confusion, which may be personal in nature or involve their work scope [15]. Other than that, these individuals also are able to voice their various anxieties and opinions through the counseling process, as indeed the objective of the counseling process is to aid individuals to have the know-how to be smart enough to free themselves of the problems that entrap them.

The need for counseling has become critical for every organization in achieving the wellbeing of employees in various aspects. Effective counseling is able to considerably enhance self-confidence and productivity within an organization, besides creating positive changes in the clients themselves. The counselor plays an extremely vital role in modifying the behavior of clients towards a more positive possibility [16].

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has discussed the factors contributing towards emotional instability among the Malaysian Firefighting and Rescue officers in Kuala Kubu Bahru before, and during the time they participated in their promotion course. In this study, it has also been proven that conducting of group counseling intervention for 16 hours in five stages has managed to improve emotional stability among participants. Besides that, group counseling intervention has provided a greater understanding of group counseling functions in elevating their emotional stability, and also shifted their perception towards the role of counseling services in an organization. The study participants were of the opinion that counseling services are needed in every fire department so that they can have recourse to it if any problems or issues should arise. Therefore, it is imperative that counseling services be enhanced in organizations so as to provide greater exposure regarding group counseling, which is considered to be still in its incipient stages in Malaysia.

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