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Letter to the Editor

Psychosocial wellbeing and stress coping strategies during COVID-19 of social workers in Southern Leyte, Philippines

1. Introduction

During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, frontline workers' mental wellbeing is considered vulnerable (Wadoo et al., 2021). To ensure the psychological wellbeing of frontline workers (Tandon, 2020), the reference should not only point to the health care workers but also, by extension, to the social workers. The role of social workers is crucial because they attend to the most pressing needs of the vulnerable (Redondo-Sama et al., 2020) despite being vulnerable themselves in a pandemic that continues to 'wreak havoc' everyday (Tandon, 2021). The article aims to evaluate the psychosocial wellbeing and the stress coping strategies of the healthcare workers in a province during COVID-19. It is important to investigate at a provincial level in the Philippines because every province has different quarantine measures depending on the COVID-19 cases (Kahambing, 2021b). Southern Leyte has 18 municipalities and 1 city capital. 18 social workers corresponded, excluding those whose internet connection or otherwise too preoccupied with other matters. During the first five months of lockdown in 2020, the province has zero cases (Kahambing and Edilo, 2020) but as of the 14th of May 2021, the Provincial Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit reported a total of 1183 cumulative confirmed case, 100 of which are active, and has already resulted in 18 deaths.

The demographics of the social workers included gender, age, and length of service as a social worker. As to gender, 14 (77.8 %) respondents were female. As to age, 9 (50 %) were less than 35 years old, 4 (33.3 %) were more than 55 years old, 2 (16.7 %) were between 36–45 years old, and no one from between 46–55 years old. More than a quarter are then also senior citizens, which puts them in a more vulnerable position while working. As to the length of service, 12 (66.7 %) served for less than 10 years, 4 (27.8 %) served for more than 30 years, 2 (5.6 %) served for 10–20 years.

2. Consent statement

The participants give their consent throughout the correspondences of the study.

3. Social workers' psychosocial wellbeing during COVID-19

The study made use of the factors of psychosocial wellbeing thematized by Aughterson et al. (2021), which were 1) the communication challenges during COVID-19, 2) work-related stressors in the area, 3) support structures, 4) instances of resilience, and 5) instances of personal growth. This was juxtaposed to their stress coping strategies that may reflect unhealthy mechanisms as in Bamuhair et al. (2015), or healthy mechanisms as in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

(CDC; 2021). As to communication challenges, most responded about the difficulty in virtual consultations and this is because of slow/poor internet connection or unstable mobile network. Communications that need to be reported in hard copies to the main office can hardly be submitted due to the increase of commute fares in the province. As to work-related stressors, most responded with fear of contracting the virus and its connection to the protection of loved ones. This is due to citizens who do not follow health protocols. There is also the increase not only of workload pressure but of demand on financial assistance despite the limited budget and limited time of implementation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP). As to support structures, there is much emphasis on the political will of leaders and team unity. There is a functioning moral and social support structure such as the Municipal Local Government Office Officer (MLGOO) and Municipal Inter-Agency Task Forces (MIATFs). As to instances of resilience, there was proactive coping and acceptance of uncertainty. As to instances of personal growth, there was increased reflection and improved non-work or family relationships. Some engaged personal shifting of thinking paradigms and one was able to enroll in a scholarship program online for law school.

4. Social workers' stress coping strategies during COVID-19

As to the unhealthy stress coping mechanisms, 11 (64.7 %) reported being self-critical, 8 (47.1 %) reported denying reality as well as distracting oneself from responsibilities, 4 (23.5 %) reported not seeking support from others, 2 (11.8 %) reported humoring (out of place) of serious situations, and 1 (5.9 %) reported worrying/overthinking. There are also healthy coping strategies. 15 (83.3 %) reported eating healthy food. 13 (72.2 %) reported taking deep breaths, stretching, or meditating, as well as connecting with others or talking to others. 12 (66.7 %) reported taking breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including those on social media. 12 (66.7 %) also reported continuing preventive measures (such as social distancing). 10 (55.6 %) reported connecting with community or faith-based organizations such as the Church. In one municipality, people saw it as an instance of hope that their town has produced a priest through an ordination last 2020 amid the pandemic (Kahambing, 2021a). 8 (44.4 %) reported exercising regularly and 7 (38.9 %) reported avoiding alcohol and tobacco. And only 1 (5.6 %) reported family bonding by going to beaches.

5. Discussion

In the pandemic, the risks posed to social workers include the inability to 'touch' as they communicate with vulnerable people in these very particular circumstances—this is indeed the stuff of 'front-line'

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practice' (Golightley and Holloway, 2020). This is substantiated with communication challenges especially with the use of virtual communication. To avoid further stressors, the citizens must follow preventive measures. There are, however, more healthy stress coping strategies than unhealthy ones. Having a positive mindset with proactive coping is an essential factor in their psychosocial wellbeing. The social workers get by through team unity and functioning support structures.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The author certifies that the study was objectively steered and reports that no financial interests or non-financial interests influenced whatsoever the conduct of the study. Any relationship with the participants – personal or professional – is treated incognito to ensure objectivity.

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