

## Research Article

# Resources to Support Addiction Counselors: A Qualitative Investigation

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**Abstract**

Individuals who choose the career path of being a substance use counselor are dedicated to helping those in need at their most vulnerable times. With 7.4 % of U.S population, ages 2 and older, having experiences some type of substance use disorder in 2018, we can expect that counselors have busy schedules with a variety of responsibilities. When looking at the general employment group of human services employees, we know they have increasing rates of job burnout caused by high caseloads and the wide variety of daily tasks they are responsible for.

**INTRODUCTION**

Individuals who choose the career path of being a substance use counselor are dedicated to helping those in need at their most vulnerable times. With 7.4 % of U.S population, ages 2 and older, having experiences some type of substance use disorder in 2018, we can expect that counselors have busy schedules with a variety of responsibilities [1]. When looking at the general employment group of human services employees, we know they have increasing rates of job burnout caused by high caseloads and the wide variety of daily tasks they are responsible for [2]. Burnout is created by the continuous expectations of physical, emotional and mental tasks which create exhaustion in our human service employee population [2]. Gomez and Michael is [3], identified that simply shifting some of the paperwork responsibility off our human services works could decrease their stress. Giving these employees access to resources to cut down on this paperwork could be the support they desperately need.

Substance use counselors have many job responsibilities with due dates overlapping. Time management is a vital skill for successful counselors to possess. When a counselor is juggling their responsibilities, and is thrown additional last-minute work, time management can be difficult for even the most seasoned counselor. Counseling practitioners often report insufficient time for proper training in how to best use evidence-based interventions [4]. Researchers Rapp et al. [5], identified counseling supervisors were not supportive of counselors asking for support or to lower their work loads. Being able to utilize better time management skills is associated with lower job stress [6].

One of the many role's counselors take on is that of educator

when facilitating counseling groups. Krajcik and Delen [7], identified that teachers are at the center of their students' learning results. This means when our counselors have strong curriculum resources to use for their lessons, the students see better lesson plans and more successful teaching. Choppin [8], investigated that when teachers used learning materials, they were able to understand the content themselves in a deeper way. This guided them in giving the students an opportunity to make more sense of the content [8]. The learning process benefits when the facilitators are developed as educators [9]. Integrating new learning strategies is a great way to strengthen a facilitator's ability [9]. Specifically, when viewing substance use counselors as educators, Lorenz, Stuebing, Nambeye, Lungu & Littlefield [10], identified that using curriculum when facilitating groups increased client's motivation for decreased substance use. Substance use disorder treatment by means of curriculum-based content led to significant decreases of frequency of substance use [10].

Evidence based best practices are techniques which integrate clinical experience and expertise with research to form clear definitions of practices and clinical effectiveness established within the literature [4]. In substance use, counseling strategies are often rooted in evidence-based best practices. Examples of evidence based best counseling practices include motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, solution-focused therapy, relapse prevention approaches and group theory [11]. Myers and Harper [12], researched and shared that as clients' populations, demographics and counseling need change, evidence based best practices are consistently applicable and beneficial to the clinical outcomes. Fixsen, Blasé, Duda, Naom & Van Dyke [13], speak to how evidence based best practices are the products of immense funding and proven research.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study was to identify possible resources that substance-use counselors think would make their jobs easier. The qualitative study was guided by the research question (1) What type of resources would support a counselor in performing their job duties easier, (2) How would a resource book of group counseling activities impact their ability to perform their overall job duties.

Interviews were conducted with volunteer participants and audio recorded with their consent. The researcher scheduled the interviews to take place at convenient times for the participant, some happened in-person, and some happened over the phone.

### Recruitment

We used the purposive sampling technique to recruit participants from the New York area for this study. To participate in this study, the participants needed to be working as substance use counselors. Demographic questions included age range, gender, occupation, and highest level of education completed. Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols were followed and approved. The researcher went to 17 substance-use counseling facilities to hand deliver flyers and speak to counselors about participating. The researcher also sent messages to colleagues on LinkedIn who were listed as working as substance use counselors. A total of 15 counselors volunteered to participate in the study. Informed consent was collected by signature or verbally recorded prior to the interview.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Questions

The population of participants were 10 females and 5 males. They ranged from 20 to over 61 years of age. When asked about their highest level of education received, the research identified that 7 of them had their associated degree, 4 of them had their bachelor's degrees and 4 of them had their master's degrees. When asked how long they have been actively working in the substance use counseling field, the times varied from 9 months to 42 years. The participants have worked in a variety of facilities including inpatient, psycho outpatient, outpatient, supportive living, methadone clinics, community clinics, residential and detox facilities.

### Interview Questions

The first question that was asked after the demographic questions was if last minute tasks ever come up. This question was asked to get a better sense of the counselor's day and routines. Thirteen of the 15 participants reported 'Yes', last minute tasks do come up. Common themes included that they get 'overwhelmed' a lot with these last-minute tasks and that 'time management and patients are essential' to being successful in this role. Multiple participants stated that they 'have gotten used to it' and that they can 'anticipate a certain number of emergencies.

The next interview question was asking the counselors what they thought would help them perform their job duties better and easier. Common themes included 'lessening their client load' and holding more trainings. Specifically, 4 of them reported that having more information on resources and information on clinical practices would be very helpful. Other responses included having binders of resources and simply having more time would be incredibly helpful.

When asked how a resource book of counseling activities helps them perform their job duties better or easier, the response was overwhelming in favor of such a resource. All 15 participants answered 'yes' and continued to explain how or why a resource book of counseling activities would support both of them in their job duties but also support and create better clinical environments for their clients. Responses included that having a counseling activities resource would be 'immensely helpful' and that it would 'make things a lot easier'. Multiple participants brought up having a resource would be nice to have curriculum in front of them and they could run better groups because they wouldn't have to waste time trying to figure out what to do at the last minute. One participant stated, 'I run like 6 or 7 groups a week and a lot of the times I can get group overload where it's hard for me to focus on which group I'm going into next and be able to have activities laid out next to me....would take off some of the pressure'. Five of the participants specifically brought up how having a resource of counseling activities would help them with their busy schedules and with time.

## DISCUSSION

When a counselor is given a last-minute task of facilitating a counseling group, participants identified that this could create feeling overwhelmed. This creates situations where counselors are unsure where they should focus their time, on immediate crisis at hand, creating content for a last minute assigned group or other paperwork that is also due. Thomas, Kohli and Choi [2], found that role ambiguity is directly connected to workplace stress. These last-minute tasks create more stress on our substance use counselors. Claessens, van Erde, Rutte & Roe [14], shared proven techniques to help improve professional time management which include setting short term and long-term goals, prioritizing tasks and scheduling. The issue with applying these proven time management techniques in the substance abuse counselor's world is last minute tasks consistently come up. The participants repeatedly agreed that last-minute tasks are expected daily. If a counselor cannot organize their responsibilities, they cannot apply proven time management skills.

The participants strongly agreed with the possible benefits of having curriculum to follow for group counseling activities. They discussed the benefits including lowering their stress load, giving them access to materials so they can facilitate stronger counseling groups. When teachers use curriculum, their students have better learning outcomes [8]. This supports the findings by Lorenz et al. [10], of substance use counselors who used curriculum identified decreased use of substance use frequency in clients.

## CONCLUSION

Providing educators and counselors with evidence based best practice resources could help develop them into stronger educators. One resource investigated during these interviews was a resource book of substance use activities to be used for group sessions. All 15 participants agreed that this type of resource would be helpful for many reasons. When a counselor has a resource of activities to choose from, they are able to dedicate more time to their other job duties which take place in-between group sessions.

Limitations of this study include that the participants all lived in the New York area. Other states may have services or resources in place to support counselors in this way. Another limitation is the interview questions were guided by the researcher creating an open education resource focused on collecting group session activities. Additional questions could have been asked about other forms of resources that counselors might think could be beneficial.

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