Positive Benefit of Being a Peer Counselor for Emerging Adults with ACE's History : A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) have the traumatic potential to have long-lasting negative impacts on physical health and affect psychological development into adulthood. Emerging adults with a history of ACE's tend to feel negative emotions such as stress, depression and anxiety when entering emerging adulthood. However, some emerging adults with history of ACE's show positive involvement by providing as peer counselors. The aim of this research is to explain the psychological benefit of being peer counselor with ACE's as emerging adult. This qualitative research consisted of three participants aged 18-25 who had at least one year of experience as peer counselors and had score ACE in the moderate category. There were five main themes revealed in this study : (1) Desire to help others (2) Emotions of being peer counselor, (3) Perception in understanding family problems, (4) Positive coping to hadle the ACE's trigger, (5) Increase positive self-meaning. Experience as a peer counselor helps reduce the impact of ACE in emerging adults.

Keywords: Adverse Childhood Experiences, Emerging Adult, Peer Counselor.

1 Introduction

Cases of violence against minors are still a global problem that has not been resolved properly. Violence can occur in various forms: physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect. Including what occurred in Indonesia, 10,337 cases of violence were reported so far in 2024, of which 63.8% of the victims were minors and 81.6% of the perpetrators were adults [1]. Violence cases have increased from the previous year. In 2023, there were 3,547 cases reported to occur in the family (35%), school (30%), society (23%), and other places unmentioned (12%). Apart from that, the cases are dominated by sexual violence (1915 cases), followed by physical violence and psychological violence [2]. Exposure to violence in childhood has a significant impact on individuals in the form of trauma with long-term consequences. Experiences of violence in childhood, such as weaponized violence, sexual abuse, physical abuse, can have severe psychological impacts, such as post-traumatic stress and abnormal personality development [3].

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) are one or many potentially traumatic events that can have a long-term negative impact on health and well-being [4]. WHO (2020) defines ACE as negative experiences that cause stress in children, such as neglect, psychological and physical violence, sexual abuse, and other violence by parents or caregivers due to dysfunction in the family, peers, and society [5]. In addition, ACE can arise if the surrounding environment does not provide a feeling of security for the child, the child grows up in a household with substance abuse or mental health problems, the child is unstable due to the parents' separation, or there is an arrest of a family member [6]. The more ACE are experienced, the higher the risk factors for various physiological and psychological health conditions [7]. ACE can predict contextual stress that leads to defensive relational schemas, risky social factors, increased substance abuse, and depressive symptoms in emerging adulthood [8]. Emerging adults in China who have experienced ACE are vulnerable to suicide, anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, and post-traumatic stress [9]. This statement is in line with a longitudinal study of emerging adult women in Australia states that a higher ACE score has an impact on the emergence of depression, anxiety, suicide attempts, and self-harm [10].

Emerging adulthood is the age stage that passes through late adolescence and has not yet entered adulthood in the range of 18-29 years [11]. This age stage is described by changes in the cognitive, emotional, and physical context and aspects of social life, which are determined by the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environment. Exploring various roles during emerging adulthood results in the potential for growth in emotional and intellectual functions, such as acting as a peer counselor who provides counseling services to peers [12]. According to Gray and Tindall, peer counseling is a process of interpersonal help carried out by a non-professional to their peers under the guidance of a professional counselor [13]. Peer counselors help peers to find solutions based on the results of counseling, both academic and non-academic problems [14]. The following reasons for becoming a peer counselor: the joy of helping friends, the desire to help friends, many friends who feel comfortable when confiding in them, inspiration from teachers or lecturers, being chosen by teachers or lecturers, and the desire to gain new experiences [15]. Many emerging adults are interested in becoming peer counselors because helping and supporting people around them provides satisfaction and meaning in life [16].

In particular during emerging adulthood, individuals can shift relying on external meanings from the authority of parents or peers to relying on internal meanings to know, form identities and establish relationships [17]. It means that individuals can be encouraged to change the source of meaning from outside to within themselves, including the hope of changing unpleasant things at the beginning of their lives. The continuity between ACE and individual meaning reaches its peak in emerging adulthood [18]. The more ACE are experienced, the higher the likelihood that an individual has negative meaning or maladaptive thought patterns [19]. Vulnerable individuals perceive that the world is full of threats, have difficulty trusting others, and feel less competent in handling life's challenges. On the other hand, individuals who undergo developmental challenges during emerging adulthood can influence themselves in determining an independent life, intimate relationships, and achievements in both career and education [12]. The dynamics such as interactions within the family, parenting patterns, responses to distress situations, and unhealthy communication impact beliefs and meaning of life events and relationships with other people [20]. ACE also affects not only meaning, it also affects individual resilience in emerging adulthood [21]. Resilience as a dynamic process that

involves increasing self-confidence to make correct judgments for regulators and emotions [22]. Individual resilience moderated by the social support of those closest to them can offset and mediate hostile dispositional rejection in emerging adults with ACE. Individuals who are aware of and evaluate social support cognitively can develop adaptability [23]. By adapting, past difficulties can be reassessed as events that can be better understood, managed, and given meaning [24]. It is concluded that the impact of ACE in emerging adulthood can be managed with the cooperation of self, mind, and social environment.

Previous research explained that ACEs experienced by counselors can affect professional development and mental health which can lead to burnout and the need for social support [25]. However, in fact, many individuals enter the counseling field because of personal struggles or trauma that lead them to the field of helping, thus contributing to their empathy for helping others [26]. The impact of ACEs on the mental health of emerging adults increases individual awareness of this but not in line with their knowledge that individuals are actually able to form personal growth that can overcome trauma. When more traumatic events occur, counselors may have more resilience to cope, perhaps because they are in a counseling program and previous counseling experience, or social support can contribute to their growth [27]. In a study research found that volunteering as a peer counselor provides a change in experience that leads to personal growth by gaining new skills and increasing self-confidence [28]. After conducting a thorough literature search, we found no other studies examining how young adults with ACEs experienced positive impacts during their peer counseling careers. The researchers in this study wanted to find out if the benefits of being a peer counselor could help understand positive ways to cope and reduce the impact of ACEs during young adulthood. Therefore, this study aims to explain the benefit of being a peer counselor with ACE as an emerging adult.

2 Method

2.1 Study Design

This study is a qualitative research utilizing a phenomenological approach. Creswell explains that the phenomenological approach focuses on individual experiences and how certain phenomena influence them to interpret their experiences [29]. Phenomenology as a method aims to understand the world from the perspective of people who experience it directly or in relation to the natural properties of human experience and the meanings given. Focusing on describing the same theme or meaning from all participants when telling the experience. The study was conducted in June 2024.

2.2 Participant

The technique used in participant recruitment was purposive sampling, which involves selecting research samples based on specific criteria to ensure the data obtained is more representative [30]. The inclusion criteria for this study were individuals aged 18-29 years, having experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), having at least one year of experience as a peer counselor, and willing to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria for this study were individuals not in the emerging adulthood phase, those who have not experienced ACE, and those with less than one year of experience as a peer counselor.

2.3 Procedure

The initial stage of conducting this research involved screening for ACE experiences among emerging adults. Screening was carried out using an adaptation of the World Health Organization Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire ($\alpha = 0.742$) [31], by distributing the google form link to groups chat and social media. Participants were selected based on inclusion criteria and ACE experience scores in the moderate category. Three selected participants were asked to participate in the study by providing an information sheet and informed consent. During this process, the researcher explained to all participants information related to the research procedure and the confidentiality of participant's identity. After signing the informed consent, all participants were then interviewed. Questions during the interview session were in accordance with the interview guide that had been prepared. The list of questions focused more on present or the participant's experiences as peer counselors and did not discuss in more depth the ACEs that each participant had experienced. This aims to reduce the impact of participant discomfort when remembering the past negative experiences and feelings caused by ACEs.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun & Clarke describe thematic analysis is a data analysis technique used in qualitative research, where researchers gather descriptive data to identify patterns and discover themes from the collected data [32] The stages of this analysis technique include familiarizing with the data, generating codes, and searching for themes. Six stages of thematic analysis: becoming familiar with the data through comprehensive reading, generating initial codes, grouping codes into themes relevant to the research objectives, dividing main themes into sub-themes, naming each theme, and writing up the analysis in the report [32]

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3 Result

There were five main themes revealed in this study. The five themes consisted of (1) Desire to help others (2) Emotions of being peer counselor, (3) Perception in understanding family problems, (4) Positive coping to hadle the ACE's trigger, (5) Increase positive self-meaning. Themes discovered from data extraction were described as follows:

Table 1. Participant demographics

Initial	Gender	Age	Experience Peer Counselor
M	Female	22	2 years
Y	Female	21	1 years
R	Female	25	2 years

Desire to help others
All three participants in this study had an inner desire to help others. Two of participats desire to be a good listener. Participants M and R had the experience of never being listened to or having no space to complain. *"I do not want other people to be like me. I want to provide a space for them to tell their stories"* (Participant M). Participant R realized in high school that,

many friends felt comfortable talking to them. Participant R also shared encouragement from friends, which made them major in psychology. Unlike the other two participants, Participant Y listened to other people's stories as a peer counselor to foster empathy and be more sensitive to the environment. All participants desire to help and support people with problems and need them through peer counseling. Support is provided through listening to clients' stories, encouragement, identifying clients' problems, and positive affirmations. Becoming a peer counselor was also driven by the desire to seek opportunities to practice psychology in everyday life professionally and to benefit others (Participants Y and R).

Emotions of being peer counselor
The results show that being a peer counselor positively and negatively impacted emotions after completing the session. Meeting clients with bad and serious problems brings negative energy to peer counselors. All participants explained that negative energy caused negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, and fatigue (M, Y, R). Negative emotions arise because of empathy as if the problem had happened to them. They are carried away by the emotional atmosphere the client feels. *"Sometimes I still get sad"* (Participants M and R). Participant Y sometimes overthinks after listening to clients' problems: "I feel exhausted, overthink what if it happened to me." Participant Y felt afraid that the client's problems also happened to her. If the problem is too severe, the client will be recommended to a colleague or other professional.

All participants enjoyed being peer counselors. Participant M was enjoyed because other people trusted them to listen to their stories. Meanwhile, participant Y's enjoyment was due to satisfaction and success in helping and supporting other people after completing the session. Participant R also enjoyed helping and was fortunate to hear many stories from various perspectives: *"I know many stories without it happening to me."* Apart from that, being needed by others increased self-esteem in participants M and R. *"I do not want other people to be like me. I feel more helpful because I can provide support and space for people to share their problems"* (Participant M). Participant R felt life is more meaningful and helpful when needed and can help other people experiencing difficulties. Peer counselors' positive feelings are due to feelings of joy and worth when they can help other people.

Perception in understanding family problems
The experience of all participants as peer counselors influences their perception of current or past family problems. All participants (M, Y, and R) showed a more positive perception of understanding family problems. Participant M, whom father abused as a child, felt deep anger and hatred. However, currently, participant M no longer wants to hate the father:
"I was abused by my father before. However, it was always considered a disgrace, so I did not dare tell others. Now, I do not want to waste energy. What is the point of getting angry now? That incident has passed. Father is also still responsible and caring. Even though I cannot forgive him, at least there is no longer any hatred. I do not want it to drag on any further."

Participants M and Y realized their parents' behavior and the reasons behind it were not always as expected. The following is Participant Y's perception regarding parents' behavior:
"I used to feel like my parents could never understand me. However, after I grew up and opened up more often, I realized that being a parent was not easy. I understand why my parents used to get angry so much that I felt embarrassed and afraid. Now, I can discuss parenting issues with my parents. Because I studied psychology, they believed my information." Various client stories during counseling sessions made Participant Y more

careful in exploring problems by being aware of the cause-and-effect aspects of the emerging behavior. Participant R's perception is similar to the perception of Participants M and Y. Participant R has a history of physical violence due to father's unstable emotions.

"I believe every family has its problems. I cannot wish to have parents according to my preferences. Maybe the father was still in the process, so his emotions were unstable, and he wanted his children to be more orderly and independent. Now, it is different. Father's behavior sometimes makes me uncomfortable to this day, but I try to see the positive side. My father always takes responsibility for providing for the family and advises on his children's career paths."

Viewing family problems from a more positive perspective by thinking about the cause-and-effect aspects of the emerging behavior also makes Participant M not focus only on the bad things that happen in his family. *"'It turns out that families are not all bad; there is a beautiful family that can be happy,' I think that way so that I can see the positive side and not get too deep in anger."* After understanding the adverse problems of the three participants, it is concluded that having a perspective from various aspects reduces the participants' negative emotions and thoughts toward their families and forms more positive prejudices. All participants realized and understood that every human has strengths and weaknesses; Participant Y explained that understanding need learning process that is not easy and basic knowledge as a peer counselor.

Positive coping to handle the ACE's trigger

All participants said that there were times when the client's stories had similarities with unpleasant events that happened to them. It triggers terrible emotions during ACE. However, being a peer counselor forms positive emotions and perspectives for all participants. It influences the choice of coping methods for each participant.

One way for Participant M to describe negative emotions is "me time," such as eating at a family restaurant. Participant M wants to see the family at the restaurant and be happier. Apart from that, Participant M shared feelings with close friends to reduce negative emotions. The support received gave Participant M peace of mind. Participant R also felt the same thing.

"I have one best friend who knows almost all my problems, including family problems. I am very grateful because I am always supported when I am sad or give up on the situation. My best friend is always worried when I am giving up. My best friend usually sends messages of support with positive affirmations to give me strength."

Apart from support from friends, Participant R's way of dealing with negative emotions is to express them by crying. Even though crying tires Participant R, it is always a great relief. Another way is jogging in an open environment or exercising, such as aerobics, one of Participant R's hobbies. Participant Y also has hobbies when feeling uneasy: *"I usually immediately divert my feelings by watching Korean dramas."* Going for a walk or watching a movie alone after working all day also makes Participant Y feeling happy. Spending time with hobbies when feeling negative emotions is one of the recommendations from Participant Y for counseling clients.

Increase positive self-meaning

The results show that all participants showed increased positive self-meaning. Participant M's self-meaning increased because of the needs and trust of others. Participant Y also felt this meaning and more confidence: *"I feel strong enough to overcome many problems. I can also*

appreciate myself more and be proud of being successful in helping other people." Participant R also showed increased self-meaning while serving as a peer counselor. The more Participant R was needed and able to help and provide support to others, the greater the confidence:
"I am happy to provide support to other people. Their feedback after counseling sessions, where they thank me and so on, sometimes touches me. It turns out other people need me. I feel my life is more meaningful because I am helpful to others."

All participants also showed gratitude when looking at other people's problems. They realized that many people have more serious problems and have reconciled. This thought made the participants more grateful, live life stronger (Participant M), and have the responsibility to develop their abilities to continue to help others (Participant Y). Participant R also expressed spiritual gratitude:
"I am grateful for all the fates that have happened in my life without reducing anything. All the unpleasant experiences I have experienced or heard from clients have become lessons and strengths in facing any circumstances or obstacles. Now, I am more focused on seeing the wisdom and positive side of every problem. I am not always consumed with feelings of sadness or hatred. Experience as a peer counselor has played a big role in continuing to provide strength."

4 Discussion

The experience of being a peer counselor had an impact on the lives of three research participants. The initial reason for becoming a peer counselor for all participants was the desire to help others, which gave them joy because they could help. This reason is in line that individuals become peer counselors because of the desire to help friends and the joy of helping friends [15]. Helping includes being a good listener and supporting clients, which reflects a quality counselor [33]. When they realize that they are needed and trusted by other people to listen to their problems, they are willing to help because they do not want other people to feel that they do not have space to tell stories and be heard, such as participants M and R. Sincerity in carrying out duties as counselors create effective counseling relationships [33].

Becoming a peer counselor provides experience in helping others and improves mental well-being by providing feelings of greater worth, empowerment, and connection with those around them [34]. All participants now have a perspective that helps them understand their family problems. Experience as a peer counselor provides challenges that lead them to independently develop strategies to overcome specific problems encountered during counseling sessions [35]. Apart from improving well-being, dealing with client problems indirectly provides resilience for peer counselors. Reivich and Shatte state that resilience is the ability to survive, adapt to something stressful, go through and overcome, and recover from adversity [36]. The resilience of all participants is demonstrated by emotional control in responding to problems, positive coping strategies, and the ability to identify the causes of problems so they do not repeat them. The ability to regulate emotions, causal analysis, and increase positive aspects within oneself are part of resilience [36].

One of the main tasks of being a counselor is to listen and help identify the problems being experienced by the client. This task sometimes provides emotional feelings, especially for counselors who have trauma from the same incident [37]. Counselors who do not try to

overcome their past trauma history have a high presentation of symptomatology, resulting in burnout due to indirect trauma obtained from clients [38]. The results study overall 67% of peer counselors received support for their trauma by participating in personal counselling [39]. This allows for the impact of being a peer counselor to provide and receive peer support that can combat loneliness, encourage the healing process and personal growth [28]. They learn new skills and new perspectives on life problems that help them process healing within themselves. When more traumatic events occur, counselors may have more resilience to cope, perhaps because they are in counseling and have previous counseling experiences, or social support may contribute to their growth [27]. Despite the challenges, many counselors expressed a sense of fulfillment and purpose in their work. They found meaning in helping others during such a critical time, which motivated them to continue their efforts to become better peer counselors [39].

Coping strategies and resilience have negatively affect emerging adults' ACE [40]. It means that the higher the coping skills and resilience an individual has, the less impact ACE have. Some participants explained the role of support from friends who strengthened them in facing problems. The role of social support is in line with the study who found that most of the resilience in the lives of emerging adults with ACE is associated with social support [22]. Social support from family, friends, mentors, and the community is vital in helping these individuals navigate challenges from their childhood adversities [22]. Emerging adults with ACE who receive positive social support are associated with better life satisfaction, which is a protective factor [41].

Besides social support, positive self-meaning can be a protective factor for emerging adults with ACE [42]. The more ACE are experienced, the higher the likelihood that an individual has negative self-meaning or maladaptive thinking patterns [43]. In contrast to these results, all participants in this study show positive self-meaning from being a peer counselor. Participants appreciate themselves more, feel more confident in their abilities, and are grateful. Gratitude is part of positive self-meaning because individuals can realize all good things and appreciate their existence [44]. Experience as a peer counselor helps reduce the impact of ACE in emerging adults.

The limitation of this research is that the participants' backgrounds are similar, so the data is not diverse. Future research can investigate more deeply by increasing the number of participants and considering differences in demographic data, such as gender or educational background. A phenomenological approach can be considered if future research wants to determine the dynamics of participants' childhood experiences.

5 Conclusion

The experience of being a peer counselor had an impact on the lives of three research participants. The initial reason for becoming a peer counselor for all participants was the desire to help others, which gave them joy because they could help. When they realize that they are needed and trusted by other people to listen to their problems, they are willing to help because they do not want other people to feel that they do not have space to tell stories and be heard. All participants now have a perspective that helps them understand their family problems. Experience as a peer counselor provides challenges that lead them to independently

develop strategies to overcome specific problems encountered during counseling sessions. Apart from improving well-being, dealing with client problems indirectly provides resilience for peer counselors. The resilience of all participants is demonstrated by emotional control in responding to problems, positive coping strategies, and the ability to identify the causes of problems so they do not repeat them.

Some participants explained the role of support from friends who strengthened them in facing problems. Social support from family, friends, mentors, and the community is vital in helping these individuals navigate challenges from their childhood adversities. Emerging adults with ACE who receive positive social support are associated with better life satisfaction, which is a protective factor. The more ACE are experienced, the higher the likelihood that an individual has negative self-meaning or maladaptive thinking patterns. In contrast to these results, all participants in this study show positive self-meaning from being a peer counselor. Participants appreciate themselves more, feel more confident in their abilities, and are grateful. Experience as a peer counselor helps reduce the impact of ACE in emerging adults.

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