

A coping model for school psychological counsellors: A qualitative study

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Abstract

This study analyzed the coping processes of psychological counsellors working in high schools in Turkey in the face of the challenges experienced in counselling sessions. The study used a qualitative research design: grounded theory. Semi-structured interviews conducted with 33 high school counsellors were analyzed following Strauss and Corbin's analysis guidelines to create a coping model. The core category in the model was 'coping' while 'actions/reactions' explained what counsellors do to cope. Finally, 'environmental factors' and 'personal factors' influenced their coping processes. The findings are discussed in light of the existing literature to provide suggestions for school counsellors to develop self-care/coping strategies, increase their resilience and decrease their burnout.

KEYWORDS

coping model, grounded theory, qualitative research, school psychological counsellors, self-care

1 | INTRODUCTION

Psychological Counselling and Guidance (PCG) services in Turkey date back to the 1950s (Özgül, 2016). According to the general goals of the Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education, school guidance and psychological counselling aim to raise individuals who are self-aware and capable of using the educational and vocational opportunities offered to them. These services also support students' social-emotional, academic, and career development to enable them to live in society healthily. In high schools specifically, guidance and psychological counselling services aim to allow students to capitalize on their traits and develop a healthy identity, adapt to changes during adolescence, realize their values and link them with social values, develop habits of studying efficiently, systematically, and deliberately, and proceed to higher education or work life according to their career goals (Res. 31213, 2020).

Despite Turkey's long history of PCG services, counsellors, especially those working in schools, still face unresolved challenges that hinder their counselling process with students. These include being responsible for too many students, administrators' and

teachers' biased attitudes and noncooperation with PCG services, administrators' unrealistic expectations from counsellors, indifferent or uncooperative parents, and insufficient time assigned for counselling (Akten, 2007; Camadan et al., 2017; Hatunoğlu & Hatunoğlu, 2006; Tagay & Savi-Çakar, 2017; Tuzgöl-Dost & Keklik, 2012). In addition, psychological counselling in high school can be more difficult and complex given the characteristics of this age group such as experiencing bodily changes, challenges of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, developing an adult self-concept, starting self-centred thinking, and performing risky behaviours, deciding on crucial matters like career, and needing to be understood (Erden & Akman, 2012).

As well as requiring constant empathy and interpersonal sensitivity, psychological counselling is most importantly a one-way assistance relationship. Hence, psychological counsellors may face unilateral emotional exhaustion (Skovholt et al., 2001). Given that counsellors are the main professional medium in counselling, they need to defend themselves, both for the sake of others and themselves. Counsellors who work in the helping and caring fields must protect themselves to dedicate themselves to their duties

(Skovholt, 2012). To protect the mental health of counsellors, it is thus crucial to minimize the occasions that cause trouble for them and develop effective coping skills or protective strategies (Dattilio, 2015).

Despite facing such challenges, psychological services professionals tend to neglect the importance of creating a sustainable balance between self-care and caring for others (Dattilio, 2015). However, ignoring this may leave them vulnerable in the face of adversities, leading to exhaustion, compassion fatigue, indirect traumatization, and reduced professional competence (Barnett & Cooper, 2009; Dattilio, 2015; Spicuzza & De Voe, 1982). Studies in Turkey find that psychological counsellors' exhaustion is associated with emotional imbalance (Camcı & Ercan, 2017) and alienation from their profession while feeling exhausted is negatively correlated with a sense of self-efficacy (Camadan et al., 2017), enhanced problem-solving skills (Çınar & Güven, 2018), higher extroversion and openness to experience (Camcı & Ercan, 2017), and spiritual satisfaction (Yıldız, 2012).

The literature offers social, emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual, and professional self-care strategies for psychological counsellors to cope with difficulties at work and when guiding sessions (O'Halloran & Linton, 2000). Social self-care includes improving interpersonal relations through increasing assertiveness and self-confidence and the ability to resolve interpersonal problems and conflicts. Emotional self-care requires coping with anger and disappointment, increasing self-respect (O'Halloran & Linton, 2000), and avoiding wishful thinking and self-blaming (Norcross, 2000). Cognitive self-care involves self-observation, self-awareness, and recognizing one's stress level (Norcross, 2000). Physical self-care covers changes in diet and increasing physical activity (Coaston, 2017) while spiritual self-care is about finding meaning in daily life events and strengthening spiritual aspects, such as loyalty, forgiveness, love, patience, joy, relaxation, and self-acceptance (Lawson & Venart, 2005; O'Halloran & Linton, 2000). Finally, for professional self-care, Norcross (2000) indicates the need to recognize the dangers of psychotherapeutic practices, which may vary from person to person. Knowing each counsellor's or psychotherapist's emotions under pressure can help in the coping process.

The present study explores school psychological counsellors' coping processes in the face of challenges they encounter during high school counselling sessions. The two primary research questions are, R1: What coping strategies have the counsellors developed to avoid burnout? R2: What are the factors, events, and situations that help in coping processes? Although there are many quantitative studies on the burnout levels of school counsellors and related variables in Turkey (e.g., Camadan et al., 2017; Camcı & Ercan, 2017), no research has analyzed in depth how counsellors cope with the process. We intentionally restricted our sample to counsellors working in high schools in order to procure a more nuanced reflection from counsellors who conducts counselling sessions with a challenging age group (Erden & Akman, 2012).

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Research design

We chose grounded theory design using a systematic lens (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) in order to analyze individual behaviours grounded in situations and social contexts (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008). Specifically, we followed the systematic approach of grounded theory by Corbin and Strauss (1990), who view grounded theory as a series of processes. This approach shows how to analyze contextual relations and how such relations determine the causes, conditions, and consequences of social processes. We specifically selected a systematic design and followed their analysis steps in order to determine which coping strategies the psychological counsellors used in their sessions, how their strategies were shaped by the surrounding conditions, situations, and events, and how their coping processes varied across contexts.

2.2 | Researcher reflexivity

This study was the product of the first author's dissertation for the doctorate programme in the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counselling. The first author was working as a psychological counsellor with children and youngsters from different age groups and adults. She occasionally provided counselling services to those age groups regarding migration, war, trauma, abuse, and domestic violence. She tried to improve her qualifications, valued professional training, and exchange opinions with colleagues and university professors on challenging cases. In this process, she witnessed the effects of counselling sessions on counsellors in both her own and her colleagues' experiences. She thought that psychological counsellors' self-protection measures and functional coping methods in the face of the negative impacts of counselling sessions were important for their physical, mental, and psychological health and their ability to conduct effective counselling sessions.

The thesis monitoring committee regularly checked the research process. In addition to the second author, who was the thesis advisor and an assistant professor, the committee consisted of an associate professor in the same department and a professor in classroom instruction. As researchers of the current study, we utilized a variety of expertise and experiences from our personal backgrounds. In our meetings, we shared our own work experiences and our difficulties and coping strategies. We discussed what questions should be asked to focus on the experiences of the participants. At the end of the analyses, we discussed how to interpret the participants' answers and how to create a model. We reviewed the model's cultural sensitivity and our assumptions when interpreting the results.

As a result, we used a variety of trustworthiness practices to take into account our various personal positions and experiences. These measures allowed us, as researchers, to take into account our

influence on the data and improve our ability to explain the model. We included an external auditor in our research to limit the potential bias in the data analysis process. The external auditor was a lecturer in the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counselling, was an expert in qualitative research; and analyzed the data independently while the first author checked the findings with the second author and other members of the committee. These checks established that the data supported our findings, interpretations, and recommendations.

2.3 | Participants

We used purposive sampling (Patton, 2014) to select participants who were employed full-time at a high school at the time. Thirty-three psychological counsellors participated in this study. Of these, 13 were men, and 20 were women. The participants ranged in age from 26 to 51 years. Counsellors living in different cities (mostly metropolitan cities such as Izmir, Istanbul, and Ankara) had different levels of education. Nineteen participants had undergraduate degrees and were not students at the time. Eight participants were master's graduates or students and six participants were doctoral graduates or students. Counsellors were working in a public high school. During the interviews, we determined that the external factors affecting the coping processes of the psychological counsellors working in public and private high schools were different from each other. In addition, we observed that private schools have different conditions from each other. For ensuring group homogeneity (Patton, 2014), we included only counsellors working in public high schools in the study.

The participants ranged in professional experience from 2 to 26 years. There are conflicting results found in the literature regarding the relationships between professional seniority and personal accomplishment (Akten, 2007; Camcı & Ercan, 2017; Çınar & Güven, 2018; İkiz, 2010; Yıldız, 2012). During the research, we realized that the coping strategies of psychological counsellors with less than 2 years of experience were underdeveloped. We, therefore, prioritized interviewing counsellors with at least 2 years experience without putting an upper limit on experience.

The participants did not provide clear answers regarding the average daily number of sessions. They stated that some sessions took the form of psychological counselling and lasted longer whereas others provided professional or career guidance, taking about 15–20 min. Whether the participants concentrated on psychological counselling or guidance depended on the school type and student age group. The daily number of sessions counsellors could offer differed accordingly. Their workloads ranged between 2 and 10 sessions per day (5 on average) and 10–50 per week (25 on average).

We did not define a specific sample size for the study. We determined the number of participants in terms of theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Accordingly, we reached saturation when all the concepts are adequately defined and explained in the study; when all categories developed sufficiently in terms of features,

dimensions, and variations, and the data collection and analysis process added no more to the conceptualization. Given the guidelines set forth by Corbin and Strauss (2015), 33 participants constituted a sufficient sample size for this study.

2.4 | Instruments and data collection

The interview questions used during the study were examined and ethically approved by the Marmara University Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

The data collection tools were a participant details questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol of 26 questions prepared by the first author, who had completed classes in qualitative data analysis and previously engaged in qualitative research projects. The first author prepared these questions to study the psychological counsellors' coping processes in the face of the difficulties they encountered during the sessions and how they perceived and experienced that process, learn the coping strategies they developed to avoid exhaustion and analyze the issue in depth. The first 10 questions included introductory questions such as how the counsellors defined their profession and what they encountered during the sessions (e.g., 'what do you do in a day related to your profession?', or 'how do you usually feel during the sessions?'). Three questions were about environmental conditions affecting the counsellors' sessions (e.g., 'what is your working environment (social and physical environment) like?', or "how does this working environment reflect on your sessions?"). The four questions explored the counsellors' coping strategies (e.g., "what do you do when you have difficulties with the sessions?", or 'how would you evaluate the time you set aside for yourself in your private life?'). The nine questions explored how counsellors' coping processes changed over time (e.g., 'can you describe an example case (if any) that impressed and challenged you during the sessions? What changes have you experienced in your professional life and in your personal feelings and thoughts after this event?', or "can you describe the most important lessons you have learned about your sessions?"). After receiving feedback regarding the questions from six experts aside from the dissertation supervisor and committee members, the first author made the necessary changes. Before conducting the interviews, she also took the opinions of colleagues who had worked in state schools at different levels (primary, secondary, and high school) on the appropriateness of the questions.

Participants were recruited via the first author's announcements on social media. Recruitment announcements indicated that the study sought psychological counsellors working full-time at a high school. Interested individuals contacted the first author, who conducted all the interviews. The first author also found suitable participants from her immediate circle, such as friends and acquaintances. Before the interviews, the participants were asked to sign a Volunteer Informed Consent Form, which provided brief information about the study and emphasized that participation was voluntary. The form included the first author's contact information

for interested participants to learn the results. The participants joined face-to-face, voice-recorded in-depth interviews (Charmaz, 2006) lasting 40 min on average and, mostly conducted in schools in each counsellor's office.

2.5 | Data analysis

In the data analysis, the systematic approach of grounded theory by Corbin and Strauss (1990) was followed. Data analysis was done by the first author. In the first step (open coding), the data were segmented line by line or even word by word to develop 2967 codes. In the second step (axial coding), the codes that emerged from the open coding were categorized and subcategorized to provide cumulative knowledge about relations between all the categories. In the third step (selective coding), all the categories were explained in detail and combined around a core category to build a theory. Finally, the core category (1 item), categories (3 items), and subcategories (11 items) were labelled and precisely defined.

After completing each interview, we re-listened to and transcribed the recordings. We tried to ensure theoretical sensitivity (Strauss, 2003) by constantly interacting with, and remaining close to the data. Having begun the analysis as soon as we had collected the first data, we continued to build hypotheses about the psychological counsellors' coping processes. After each interview, we compared the new data with the old to retest the validity of these hypotheses (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We made the analyses using MAXQDA 18 software, which helps us to organize, explore, interpret, and integrate by grouping the transcripts (Oswald, 2017).

2.6 | Trustworthiness

To satisfy the criteria for trustworthiness we engaged in some practices (Cohen et al., 2018; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Hays et al., 2016; Morse, 2015). We used constant comparison by checking the codes and the resulting categories and concepts after each analysis of the interview. We maintained prolonged engagement at the schools where the interviewed psychological counsellors were employed and conducted persistent observation. We presented the built theory to several participants and obtained member checks by confirming whether the theory represented the phenomena explained by the participants. At this stage, the participants were asked the following questions: Does the resulting model represent your experiences, processes, and narratives? Do you think something is missing or extra in the model? In addition, an external auditor analyzed the data independently of the researchers. We compared our analyses with the external auditor's analysis, and also with our results, the existing literature, our memos, and the committee's feedback. This allowed us to detect our biases regarding the topic to prevent them from distorting the research findings. We have also added our reflexivity on how we manage our views and assumptions on the subject. Another

trustworthiness practice included rich thick descriptions using participant quotes. Accordingly, we have included direct quotations from the interviews, the statements of the participants, and the visual element of the theory that emerged from the findings. Finally, using the negative case analysis practice, we reexamined the data and reviewed the accuracy of our hypotheses throughout the research. We removed or changed unsupported hypotheses.

3 | FINDINGS

In the model constructed after the analyses (see Figure 1), the core category was 'coping' while 'actions/reactions' explains what the psychological counsellors do to cope. Finally, we analyzed the 'environmental and personal factors' that affect coping processes under separate categories.

The participants quoted below are differentiated by their gender, age and years of experience (e.g., Male, 34, 10 years).

3.1 | Interactions and actions

The participants engaged in three kinds of interactions and actions to cope with the challenges faced during counselling.

3.1.1 | Receiving informative support

The primary source of informative support that the participants talked about was exchanging information with colleagues. They emphasized various benefits, such as feeling adept and powerful, approaching cases from different angles, and regaining a functional perspective in cases that were too emotionally affecting: 'There was an instance where I took sides during the session. I was siding with that girl. I wanted the boy to be punished. On that matter, I asked my colleagues and friends whose opinions I trusted' (Female, 43, 20 years).

Another form of informative support was professional training as it made counsellors feel qualified and adept: 'When I began to take therapy training, I understood the limitations and when I should stop. When my professional qualifications were not sufficient, I experienced exhaustion. Therapy training was the point when I made peace with this job' (Male, 38, 15 years). The participants also said that they would often obtain information about the developmental characteristics of the student groups they were counselling, learn their areas of interest, and read more to explore activities and practices to use with them.

Finally, the participants highlighted the role of getting personal therapy. They specifically emphasized how discussing the underlying personal reasons why they were emotionally affected during the sessions helped their personal development and functional attitudes while counselling.

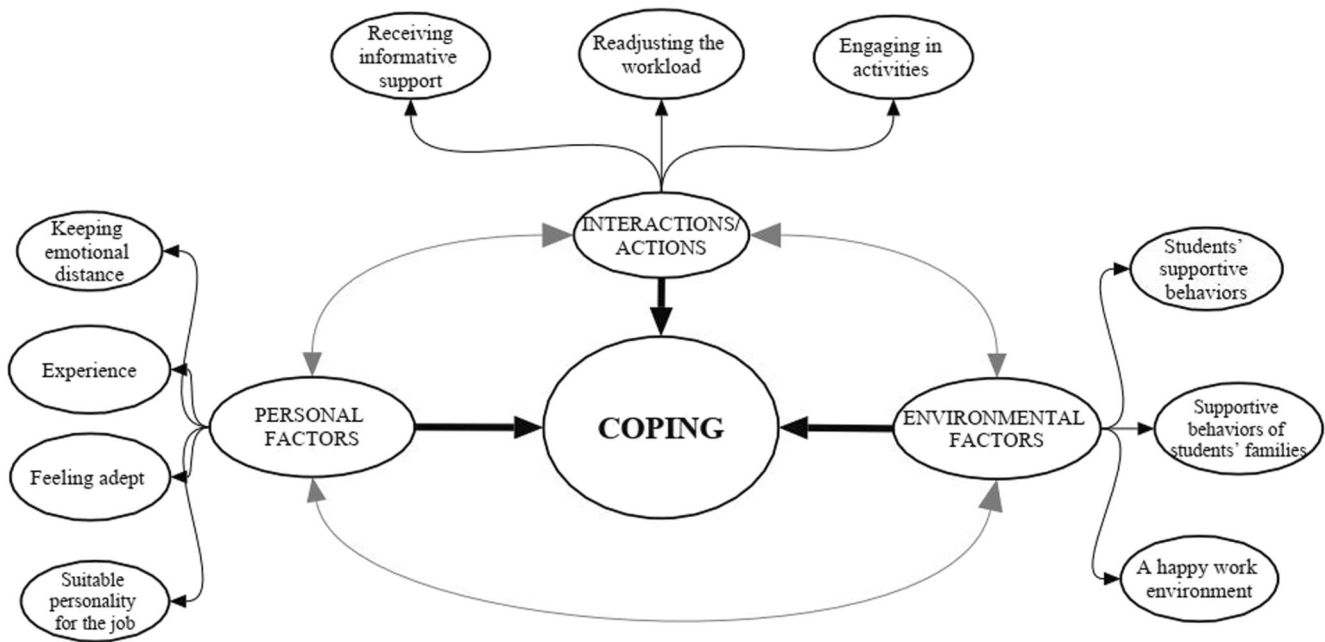


FIGURE 1 The coping model.

3.1.2 | Readjusting the workload

The participants mentioned the importance of readjusting their workload at the schools. More specifically, they claimed that they could be more effective in the sessions when they could plan. Thus, they tried to schedule sessions with students or parents through appointments. They also took breaks when necessary during work or sessions to be more helpful to their students during counselling and maintain their self-care: 'When my workload and my stress level are too much, I try not to take too many sessions because I may not listen to them [students] enough; I may not be helpful [for them] enough' (Male, 38, 15 years).

3.1.3 | Engaging in adaptive and relaxing activities

The participants stressed the value of adaptive and relaxing activities. For example, they made sure to spend quality time with family and friends to overcome the adverse effects of sessions and rest when they felt tired after holding too many sessions during the day: 'I meet with my beloved friends. It makes me happy, in that sense, as I feel nourished. I allocate time for myself and almost forget that this work I am doing is a job' (Female, 34, 7 years).

The participants also engage in outdoor activities (e.g., travelling, hiking, hunting, fishing, camping, exercising, dancing, and playing football) to relax and overcome vocational strains. They also develop occupations and hobbies (e.g., reading books, magazines, and newspapers), join various hobby courses (e.g., oil painting, photography, cooking, playing musical instruments, and calligraphy), and participate in other cultural activities (e.g., cinema, theatre, concerts, acting).

The participants with frequent counselling sessions at work found that spending time at home and resting has a crucial place in their lives. Therefore, especially after a busy workday, they take care to rest at home.

Finally, the participants saw religious faith or spirituality as vital in the coping processes. Seeing the challenges of their work and counselling processes as a test, thanking God, and praying for themselves and their students helped them feel better. As one participant put it, 'I pray for my students. I think prayer protects my mental health because I share my burden. I pray to God to help me when I am powerless, and that relaxes me' (Female, 29, 8 years).

3.2 | Environmental factors

The interviews revealed three environmental factors that facilitate coping processes.

3.2.1 | Students' supportive behaviours

The participants mentioned that students perform some supportive behaviours that facilitate coping processes, such as volunteering for the counselling sessions. Compared to those referred by their teachers, students who seek guidance services willingly are more open to change, which makes the process easier and faster. Another supportive behaviour is students' positive feedback, which increases the counsellors' professional satisfaction: "Students' feedback, such as 'Thanks to you, such and such happened, I achieved that, I am better in this issue,' are an incredible source of motivation" (Female, 26, 2 years).

3.2.2 | Supportive behaviours of students' families

The participants stated that the counselling processes were more manageable, and sessions with students were more effective and beneficial when cooperating with the families.

One father said at a meeting, 'A sentence you said influenced me a lot, and that day I gave up my phone and made my family do the same.' He attended all my meetings upon my invitation. In cases I find unbearable, some [positive] feedback increases my level of endurance (Female, 34, 7 years).

3.2.3 | A happy work environment

Having other psychological counsellors at the school is helpful for psychological, social, and informational support. Having someone to ask for information anytime they face a challenge in their sessions makes the counsellors feel more comfortable during the sessions while sharing their problems and responsibilities concerning students within the school is comforting.

Besides, when the school's teachers cooperate and work in harmony with the psychological counsellor, prioritize students' wellbeing, and approach students with an appropriate attitude, the counselling sessions are more effective for both the counsellor and the students: 'Teachers are the ones who send us the students who need us. If we do not communicate with them, there will be immense trouble. The teacher knows which students we hold sessions with and ask, 'What can we do?' (Male, 33, 9 years).

Finally, the participants described the importance of the administrator's support for their school's guidance services. Supportive behaviours included meeting material needs (e.g., tools and equipment) immediately, assigning a separate room to each psychological counsellor, providing a suitable location for the guidance service within the school, appreciating and respecting the psychological counsellor's work, and not interfering in the process.

3.3 | Personal factors

The personal characteristics of the psychological counsellors affect their coping processes in four main ways.

3.3.1 | Keeping emotional distance

The participants stated that the content of the counselling sessions did not affect them. They were able to control their emotions, avoid being overwhelmed by the students' stories, and keep an emotional distance: 'I do not perceive the challenges as my own. I protect my personality because there are hundreds of students. It is not possible to take every problem on myself' (Male, 33, 9 years).

The participants mentioned the benefits of acknowledging one's limitations in coping with unbearable situations during the counselling processes: 'If there is something I can control, I indeed control it, but there can be issues I cannot control. I mean, I accept that I cannot do everything. Acknowledging my limits empowers me. I cannot save or heal everyone' (Female, 34, 7 years).

3.3.2 | Being experienced

The participants described that thanks to their experience, they felt comfortable during the sessions and knew what to do, so they were not negatively affected by them. Additionally, they were able to voice their needs and requests within the school, and could set the limits when meeting students and parents. They also stated that they learned to take extreme care not to let the challenges of the workplace and counselling sessions interfere with their family life:

When I started my career, I had not met so many students. Actually, I was having such a hard time because I was in a state of confusion and I was affected by the sessions. But now I know what to do in which situations [or sessions]. Sessions do not affect my personal life that much anymore (Female, 26, 4 years).

3.3.3 | Feeling adept in the field

Participants who felt adept during the sessions did not face challenges or, if they did, knew how to solve them. Feeling adept requires knowing psychological counselling skills well, having good communication skills, having a comprehensive knowledge of many theories and techniques, knowing their professional rights, having a good undergraduate degree, knowing students' developmental processes and problems, working ethically, and being able to anticipate events.

I feel adept in the field because I know basic counselling skills. It is very simple: listening, focusing on the session, asking questions, and being reflective. These techniques can be very relaxing for the client [student]. As long as I do these, I feel competent (Male, 34, 10 years).

3.3.4 | Having a suitable personality for the job

According to the participants, certain personality traits facilitate coping processes. Firstly, they reported that being open to learning helped them increase their knowledge, feel adept and qualified, and love their job. They also followed recent studies, received professional training in the field, and read books.

Secondly, they described the importance of maintaining a positive perspective to cope with the challenges of counselling. They

perceived the complex cases as support to improve themselves vocationally: 'Difficult cases do not harm me; rather, they teach me. If the counsellee does not challenge me, I cannot learn' (Male, 34, 10 years). Thirdly, the participants emphasized the importance of loving the profession. They stated that a source of motivation is having a place in a child's life and causing a positive change: 'Influencing that one child's life, helping them or enabling them to know themselves, plan their careers may seem unimportant to some. I would say it is the most important thing to do in my life, (Male, 34, 10 years).

Fourthly, they emphasized that they were psychologically resilient and had a recovering or healing-oriented character: 'I am strong. I think my past experiences of troubles made a large contribution to that. It was extremely challenging to overcome them, but looking back from today, I think what made me was my past and background' (Female, 50, 21 years). Finally, the participants related that having a non-anxious personality protected them against the negative effects of counselling processes. Those who described themselves as unworried or relaxed reported that they were not so affected by the challenges of counselling sessions.

3.4 | Summary of the model

The model that emerged from our data analysis describes a dynamic process, whereby both actions and interactions may be involved in the coping processes of psychological counsellors. The model also identifies which factors may affect these processes. These factors and the counsellors' actions and interactions may be closely interrelated. For example, the counsellors who describe themselves as keeping an emotional distance and knowing their limitations stated that they tend to receive informative support when necessary. Furthermore, counsellors who receive informative support stated that they feel professionally adequate. The counsellors thought that they may know what to do as their professional experience increases. Being experienced may help to know that they need to protect themselves at work, adjust their workload, and recognize the value of resting, relaxing, and renewing activities. Moreover, the counsellors, who realize that their personal characteristics were suitable for their profession, stated that they work enthusiastically and happily. This in turn may improve their coping strategies.

The model showed that environmental factors may also be related to other factors. First, the counsellors stated that they are able to adjust their workload and take breaks at school thanks to a happy work environment, referring to administrators' and teachers' supportive behaviours. Second, they stated that the supportive behaviour of students and their families helps them feel more competent in their profession. Third, they thought that being experienced, and thus capable of keeping an emotional distance, may ensure the protection of boundaries and maintenance of good relations with students and their families. Finally, they thought that traits like being unworried, loving one's job, and being open to

learning may minimize the negative impacts of environmental factors (e.g., conflicts with administrators and teachers and high workload) and increase their endurance despite their discontent.

4 | DISCUSSION

These results provide a novel perspective on the coping processes of school counsellors, a population that is often overlooked in academic studies in Turkey. The model presented above is based on the experiences of 33 school counsellors in coping with difficulties in counselling sessions. The findings highlight the critical importance of both the counsellors' actions and interactions during the process as well as their environmental and personal conditions.

The counsellors highlighted the importance of informative support in their counselling processes. This support included colleagues' support, professional training, and personal therapy. Given that the literature emphasizes the importance of objectivity in sessions (e.g., Corey, 2008; Sayar, 2014), one important contribution of our study is the finding that the counsellors stated that they try to ensure their objectivity through informative support, especially by consulting and cooperating with colleagues, and using peer supervision. The counsellors also see professional training as a valuable source of informative support, which makes them feel more competent during counselling and motivates them to provide more therapy. This finding is consistent with Poyraz (2007), who reported that schools in Turkey with professionally trained psychological counsellors provide better quality guidance services. Reading and getting therapy were also informative sources for the counsellors in this study. Such sources may also increase self-awareness, which previous studies have identified as a valuable characteristic for counsellors (e.g. Corey, 2008; Norcross, 2000; Salahi et al., 2014).

The counsellors mentioned trying to schedule sessions by appointment and taking breaks from sessions (or work) to control their workload. They stated that they did this to avoid exhaustion. This finding is consistent with Lawson and Venart (2005), who argue that counsellors need a controllable environment that allows them to adjust their workload. Given that psychological counsellors who overwork face compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002) and exhaustion (Akten, 2007), our findings may help guide other psychological counsellors on how to avoid professional exhaustion.

The counsellors highlighted the importance of sources of social support (family and friends) in overcoming vocational challenges, which they rated as even more valuable than receiving therapy. Previous studies have also shown the importance of social support for counsellors. For example, Grafanaki et al. (2005) suggest that spending time with family and friends is associated with higher job satisfaction and well-being. Additionally, social support is positively correlated with counsellors' self-efficacy (Gündüz, 2012) and problem-solving skills (Bulut, 2007). The present study supports these findings and suggests that social support can increase counsellors' positive feelings towards their profession and their self-efficacy when coping with difficulties.

The counsellors also stated that they resort to various outdoor activities and hobbies, which creates an opportunity to listen to oneself and be alone or, conversely, have a good time interacting with one's social circle. These findings confirm previous studies of the role of such activities in coping processes and self-care (e.g., Edmondson, 2009; Grafanaki et al., 2005; Lawson & Venart, 2005; Martin, 2009; O'Halloran & Linton, 2000; Skovholt, 2012). Staying at home to rest was seen as indispensable for counsellors who overwork and have frequent counselling sessions. The importance that the counsellors give to this is understandable, given that sleep quality and stress levels are negatively correlated (Almojali et al., 2017; Carlson & Garland, 2005). Finally, another valuable source of support is the counsellors' spiritual or religious rituals. This is consistent with previous studies showing correlations between spiritual practices and psychological counsellors' job satisfaction and wellbeing (Coaston, 2017; Connolly & Myers, 2003; Grafanaki et al., 2005; Tekke & Watson, 2017).

According to the counsellors, students' voluntary participation in the sessions facilitates the process and cooperation because the counsellors do not face resistance, which can disrupt or complicate counselling sessions. Arslan (2018) showed that school counsellors in Turkey who face difficulties during sessions with students feel inadequate and exhausted. Both studies confirm that the students' attitudes towards sessions can affect counsellors' work motivation and burnout levels. The importance of positive feedback from students should also be mentioned here as it was emphasized both in our study and in Tuzgöl-Dost and Keklik (2012) that such feedback may raise counsellors' work motivation. The counsellors in our study also found parental support necessary for a positive change in students as it contributes to the counselling process and the counsellor's job satisfaction. Previous studies have found a relationship between having problems with a student's family and counsellor exhaustion (Arslan, 2018; Güler & Ceyhan, 2019). Thus, our finding is important in emphasizing the important role of parents in counsellors' coping processes.

The counsellors said that a happy work environment is important for their coping process, specifically working with another psychological counsellor at their school, and cooperating with teachers and the administrators' supportive behaviours. Previous studies in Turkey have also shown that counsellors who can cooperate with teachers and administrators have high job satisfaction and competence beliefs (Gündüz & Çelikkaleli, 2009; Uslu, 1999). Our study adds to these findings by detailing that such external support can enable the counsellors to share responsibilities, reach out to students in need, and conduct more effective counselling sessions.

The psychological counsellors highlighted the importance of keeping an emotional distance during the sessions. Scheff (1981) defines distancing emotion as not being overwhelmed by emotions by being too close to them while not alienating oneself from one's emotions by keeping too much distance. Accordingly, the counsellors in our study, while keeping their emotional distance, give importance to students' narratives yet avoid getting overwhelmed and losing themselves in the face of the problems they witness. As Skovholt et al. (2001) note, constantly making unilateral sacrifices and

witnessing troubled lives can cause emotional exhaustion. Our findings, therefore, highlight the importance of maintaining a balance between these two extremes. Another issue underlined by the psychological counsellors for maintaining emotional distance is an awareness of the limits of one's competence during counselling. This confirms previous findings that avoiding exhaustion requires knowing one's limitations and clearly identifying one's role (see Corey, 2008; Cruz, 2013; Culver, 2011; Güler & Ceyhan, 2019).

Participants pointed out the importance of feeling competent during counselling sessions and being experienced. Thanks to their experience, they believe they can separate work from private life, which is seen as crucial for a professional. Similarly, Güler and Ceyhan (2019) found that professional seniority makes counsellors in Turkey more resilient. Our findings also indicate what experience can provide to a counsellor. For example, the counsellors said that the ability to separate work from private life and feeling competent comes with experience. Both of these abilities are associated with higher job satisfaction (Ekşi et al., 2015) and lower exhaustion (Arslan, 2018; Camadan et al., 2017; Güler & Ceyhan, 2019). That is, experience can prevent burnout and provide job satisfaction.

Counsellors see the cases they encounter as a means to help people and contribute to their self-improvement rather than experiencing regret or exhaustion, even when they feel ineffective in a session. Consistent with these findings, Sayar (2014) underlines the healing aspects of helping another person while Bradley et al. (2013) emphasize how noticing minor improvements in the counsellee makes the counsellor feel better. Additionally, psychological counsellors related that their personality structure promotes recovery or healing when explaining how they coped with challenges, and added that they had an unworried attitude towards events.

5 | LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations. First, the differences in years of experience among the participants may have avoided the homogeneity of the participants. Secondly, the difference between the number of sessions the participants take each day is also large. This is because some counsellors conduct shorter professional or career guidance sessions whereas, others hold longer psychological counselling sessions. These differences may also affect the difficulties they experienced and thus their coping processes. Third, the participants were chosen from the big cities in Turkey, such as Izmir and Istanbul, which the researchers could reach more easily. However, professional experiences and coping processes in different regions of Turkey may differ.

6 | CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Only a few studies have been conducted with school counsellors in Turkey and these have generally focussed on the difficulties that school counsellors experience in their profession. However, school

counsellors should know how to protect themselves and deal with difficulties in their profession. Therefore, this study is important because it identifies the strengths of school counsellors in order to guide other school counsellors. Although the study focussed specifically on counsellors working in high schools, the coping suggestions that emerged from the findings could provide effective recommendations for all school counsellors.

The findings highlighted the kinds of characteristics that psychological counsellors need and the actions they can take to cope with the difficulties they experience in the sessions (e.g., taking therapy training). The findings also reveal several environmental factors that can affect the counsellors' coping processes. These findings are valuable because they emphasize the importance of counsellors' collaboration with teachers, colleagues, parents, and school administrators. In this context, some practices (e.g., group meetings, training groups, etc.) can be carried out to improve communication between psychological counsellors, administrators, and teachers.

In addition, the findings suggest how counsellors can protect themselves. It is crucial to identify which factors prevent counsellors from receiving help for themselves and which encourage therapy. It is also important to identify exhausted school counsellors and help them access appropriate sources of support. The psychological counsellors in this study talked about many actions that make them feel good during the process. We thought that counsellors can benefit from psycho-education programs or handbooks that focus on self-help or self-care, covering these and many other actions and interactions. However, it was noted that the psychological counsellors in this study did not receive supervision. Emphasis should be placed on the importance of receiving supervision for the professional development and personal care of psychological counsellors. Their access to group or individual supervision should be facilitated and they should be encouraged to receive this service.

We also have some suggestions for further research: (a) With mixed research in which both qualitative and quantitative methods are used, more participants can be included. Additionally, qualitative and quantitative data can be compared, and richer data sources can be reached. (b) It is not known whether a coping process to be explored for all mental health professionals is possible. However, when the difficulties during sessions are focussed on, it seems possible to bring together each member of different fields of work on a common ground. In this regard, it may be useful to provide a diversity of participants and create a more inclusive coping/self-care strategy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [H]. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions [e.g. their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants].

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