COUNSELLING NEEDS FOR CAREGIVERS WORKING WITH VULNERABLE OLDER ADULTS

[*]Musbau Dare YUSUF, Jamila YUSUF and Adekola Kamil LASISI

Department of Educational Management and Counselling, Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Nigeria.
[*]Corresponding Author: musbaudare@gmail.com; 2348108168958

Abstract

Caregivers who work with vulnerable older adults face multifaceted emotional, psychological, and practical challenges that can significantly impact their well-being and effectiveness in providing care. This paper explores the counselling needs of both formal and informal caregivers who support vulnerable older adults experiencing physical frailty, chronic illness, cognitive decline, and social vulnerability. Sources of stress were identified: multimorbidity and care recipient healthy complexity, cognitive impairment, sleep disturbances, low social support, lack of awareness or lack of support resources, among others. The caregiving role often exposes individuals to distressing experiences such as witnessing the decline, chronic illness, or death of the older adults in their care. These encounters may result in emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and diminished empathy, all of which negatively impact caregivers' well-being. The following suggestions were made: Counsellors should provide coping strategies such as relaxation techniques, mindfulness, cognitive-behavioural skills, and emotional processing to reduce burnout and promote psychological resilience. Counsellors should equip caregivers with knowledge about ageing-related conditions, behavioural changes in older adults, communication techniques, and realistic expectations. This empowers caregivers to understand the caregiving process better and reduces frustration, fear, and helplessness. Counsellors should help caregivers to develop time-management skills, explore social support systems, and create healthy boundaries to manage role conflict and reduce role overload. Counsellors should help them process these emotions, prepare psychologically, and develop effective coping mechanisms during transitions or medical emergencies.

Keywords: Counselling, Needs, Caregivers, Vulnerable, Older Adults

Introduction

Caregivers who provide support to vulnerable older adults face numerous psychological, emotional, and physical challenges that highlight the critical need for counselling interventions. Globally and particularly in low and middle-income countries such as Nigeria, the ageing population continues to increase due to improved life expectancy and changing demographic structures. As a result, it seems more older adults require continuous assistance with daily activities, medical care, and emotional support. This growing demand places substantial pressure on both formal caregivers, such as nurses and social workers, and informal caregivers, including family members. The caregiving role is not merely a set of tasks; it encompasses sustained emotional labour, decision-making responsibilities, and constant vigilance, often under conditions of limited resources and societal support.

Caregivers are individuals who provide support and care to people who need assistance with daily living activities, emotional support, or medical needs (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2020). They care for the elderly, disabled, or those with chronic illnesses, helping with tasks like bathing, dressing, and managing medications. Caregivers can be formal (trained professionals) or informal (family, friends, volunteers) (National Institute on Ageing, 2021). They provide physical, emotional, and sometimes financial support, improving the quality of life for those in need. Caregivers are individuals who provide support and care to people who need assistance with daily living activities, emotional support, or medical needs. They care for the elderly, disabled, or those with chronic illnesses, helping with tasks like bathing, dressing, and managing medications. Caregivers can be formal (trained professionals) or informal (family, friends, volunteers), providing physical, emotional, and sometimes financial support, improving the quality of life for those in need (AARP, 2023).

Caregivers in this context are the individuals working with vulnerable older adults in Nigeria who provide essential support and care to elderly individuals who require assistance with daily living activities. These caregivers play a vital role in ensuring the well-being and quality of life of older adults who are often vulnerable

due to physical, cognitive, or mental health conditions. The caregiving role often exposes individuals to distressing experiences such as witnessing the decline, chronic illness, or death of the older adults in their care. These encounters may result in emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and diminished empathy, all of which negatively impact caregivers' well-being. Compassion fatigue, described as the emotional and physical erosion resulting from caring for individuals experiencing trauma or chronic illness (Figley, 2017), is prevalent among caregivers of older adults.

When unaddressed, it increases the risk of mental health challenges, reduces the quality of care provided, and contributes to caregiver burnout. Moreover, caregivers frequently experience moral distress when they perceive they are unable to meet the complex needs of care recipients adequately, further compounding emotional strain (Schulz & Sherwood, 2008). The psychological burden faced by caregivers is amplified by competing life responsibilities, including household duties, employment constraints, financial pressures, and child-rearing obligations (Akorede et al., 2021). In countries like Nigeria, where access to mental health services remains grossly inadequate, caregivers frequently lack the coping resources and professional guidance needed to manage their challenges effectively. Caregivers without adequate emotional support, counselling services, or coping skills are more vulnerable to stress-related disorders such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (Akintayo & Bamidele, 2020). The lack of structured support networks often isolates caregivers, leaving them to navigate emotionally taxing situations alone, which can diminish their overall quality of life and impair caregiving outcomes (Adelman et al., 2014).

Types of Caregivers

Caregivers can be broadly categorised into formal and informal caregivers, each playing a crucial role in supporting vulnerable older adults. Formal caregivers are trained professionals who provide care within institutional or community-based settings. They include nurses, social workers, geriatric care aides, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and other paid staff in hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centres, and home-care agencies (Isiaq et al., 2026; Muhammed et al., 2025). Formal caregivers typically operate under established guidelines, possess specialised skills, and deliver care as part of their professional duties (WHO, 2021). Their responsibilities often include administering medication, assisting with activities of daily living, monitoring health conditions, and providing emotional support to older adults.

In contrast, informal caregivers are unpaid individuals who provide essential care within home or community settings. They are usually family members, friends, neighbours, or relatives who take responsibility for supporting older adults with daily activities, physical assistance, financial management, and emotional companionship. Informal caregivers often lack formal training and may juggle caregiving with employment, childcare, and other domestic responsibilities, which exposes them to high levels of stress and burnout (Adelman et al., 2014). Additionally, there are secondary or occasional caregivers, such as volunteers, community health workers, and faith-based support providers, who offer supplementary assistance based on availability. These categories highlight the diversity of caregiving roles and the varying levels of support required to meet the needs of vulnerable older adults.

Sources of Stress among Caregivers Working with Vulnerable Older Adults

Caregivers working with vulnerable older adults experience stress from various sources, including:

Emotional Stress: Caregivers working with vulnerable older adults experience stress from various sources. One of the primary sources of stress is emotional stress, as watching loved ones decline or dealing with difficult behaviours can be emotionally draining (AARP, 2023). This emotional stress can lead to feelings of burnout, anxiety, and depression.

Physical Demands: The physical demands of caregiving are another significant source of stress. Lifting, bathing, and moving older adults can be physically taxing, leading to injuries and chronic health problems (National Institute on Aging, 2021). Many caregivers neglect their own physical health, prioritising the needs of their loved ones over their own, which can lead to long-term health consequences.

Financial Strain: Financial strain is another significant source of stress for caregivers. Medical bills, caregiving expenses, and potential loss of income can be costly, leading to financial hardship (AARP, 2023). Many caregivers experience financial hardship, struggling to make ends meet while providing care for their loved ones.

Lack of Support: Caregivers often feel overwhelmed and alone in their caregiving responsibilities, exacerbating caregiver burden (National Institute on Aging, 2021). The lack of support can lead to feelings of frustration and resentment.

Time Commitment: Caregiving can also be a time-consuming endeavour, impacting work, social life, and personal time, leading to feelings of isolation (WHO, 2020). Caregivers may need to adjust their work schedules, take time off, or leave their jobs altogether, leading to financial strain.

Navigating Healthcare Systems: Navigating complex healthcare systems and bureaucracy can be overwhelming (WHO, 2020). Caregivers must navigate multiple systems, including healthcare, insurance, and social services, which can be time-consuming and frustrating (Adamu et al., 2025).

Concepts of Counselling Needs of Caregivers

The counselling needs of caregivers refer to the emotional, psychological, informational, and social support required to cope effectively with the demands of caring for vulnerable older adults. Caregivers often experience high levels of stress, compassion fatigue, and emotional exhaustion due to prolonged exposure to chronic illness, dependency, or deterioration of the older adults they support. Counselling is therefore essential for helping caregivers manage overwhelming emotions, develop healthy coping strategies, and enhance their psychological resilience. Through counselling, caregivers gain opportunities to express their feelings, process grief or frustration, and build skills for emotional regulation and stress management (Figley, 2017; Adelman et al., 2014). These interventions reduce the risk of mental health challenges and enable caregivers to maintain their well-being while carrying out caregiving duties.

The counselling needs of caregivers have become increasingly evident. Caregivers require structured emotional support, stress-management interventions, and opportunities to process their experiences in healthy ways. Counselling can provide essential skills such as emotional regulation, problem-solving strategies, and self-care practices. Psychoeducational programmes can also help caregivers understand the physical, cognitive, and emotional changes associated with ageing, improving caregiver competence and confidence (Cheng, Li, Losada, & Zhang, 2019). Additionally, targeted counselling interventions can reduce feelings of isolation and facilitate peer-to-peer support, which strengthens resilience and promotes sustained caregiving engagement.

Evidence shows that protective factors such as resilience, coping strategies, spirituality, and strong social networks play critical roles in mitigating psychological distress among caregivers (Cañadas-De la Fuente et al., 2023). Resilient caregivers are more likely to maintain psychological stability, adapt to caregiving demands, and find meaning in their roles. Counselling interventions that foster these protective factors have been shown to decrease depression, improve problem-solving abilities, and enhance overall well-being (Cheng, 2017). Furthermore, resilience-building strategies empower caregivers to navigate crises, manage grief, and maintain a positive outlook despite the challenges associated with caring for vulnerable older adults.

In addition to emotional and psychological support, counselling can improve caregivers' physical health outcomes. Chronic stress experienced by caregivers has been linked to cardiovascular problems, sleep disturbances, and weakened immunity (Schulz & Sherwood, 2008). By teaching stress reduction techniques, mindfulness practices, and self-care routines, counselling can mitigate these risks and promote holistic well-being. Caregivers who receive such support are better positioned to maintain their own health, thereby reducing absenteeism, fatigue, and the potential for errors in caregiving tasks.

Counselling also enhances the quality of care provided to older adults. Caregivers who are mentally and emotionally supported demonstrate higher levels of empathy, patience, and responsiveness to care recipients' needs. By addressing caregiver distress proactively, counselling indirectly contributes to improved patient outcomes, including better adherence to treatment regimens, reduced hospitalisations, and enhanced overall life satisfaction for care recipients (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2006).

Moreover, counselling can facilitate long-term sustainability of caregiving. The prolonged nature of caregiving for older adults with chronic illnesses or disabilities often leads to cumulative stress over time. Structured counselling interventions provide ongoing monitoring, support, and skill-building, allowing caregivers to maintain their roles without succumbing to burnout. By equipping caregivers with coping mechanisms and problem-solving strategies, counselling helps prevent attrition in both formal and informal caregiving settings (Akintayo & Bamidele, 2020).

Understanding the counselling needs of caregivers is also vital for policy development and institutional planning. Insights gained from counselling assessments can inform the creation of caregiver support programs, training workshops, and mental health initiatives tailored to the unique challenges faced by caregivers of vulnerable older adults. Implementing such interventions within healthcare and community systems ensures caregivers have access to timely assistance, reducing the long-term social and economic burden associated with caregiver distress (WHO, 2021).

Therefore, understanding the counselling needs of caregivers working with vulnerable older adults is essential not only for safeguarding their mental health but also for ensuring high-quality care outcomes. Strengthening counselling services, enhancing psychosocial support systems, and promoting resilience-building strategies are crucial steps toward improving caregiver well-being and sustaining long-term caregiving capacity. Integrating these approaches into national health policies and community programs is imperative to support caregivers effectively and address the multifaceted challenges of an ageing population.

Additionally, counselling needs encompass the requirement for guidance, education, and empowerment to improve caregivers' competence and sense of control in their roles. Many caregivers, especially informal or family caregivers, lack professional training and may feel unprepared or overwhelmed by the medical, emotional, or behavioural challenges associated with caring for older adults. Counselling helps bridge this gap by providing information, problem-solving skills, decision-making support, and strategies for balancing caregiving with personal responsibilities. Studies have shown that caregivers with access to structured counselling, psychoeducation, and support groups demonstrate reduced caregiver burden, improved coping ability, and better quality of life (Cheng et al., 2019; WHO, 2021). Thus, the concept of counselling needs reflects a holistic approach aimed at strengthening both the emotional health and caregiving capacity of those supporting vulnerable older adults.

Effects of counselling needs on caregivers working with vulnerable older adults.

1. Reduced Caregiver Stress: Counselling provides caregivers with coping strategies to manage daily stressors, which can significantly reduce psychological strain. High levels of stress are common among caregivers due to long hours, emotional demands, and role overload (Akintayo & Bamidele, 2020). Through counselling, caregivers can develop effective stress-management techniques, improving their overall well-being.
2. Improved Mental Health: Caregivers often experience anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Counselling interventions, including cognitive-behavioural therapy and supportive counselling, have been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety in caregivers (Schulz & Sherwood, 2008). By addressing these mental health challenges, counselling helps caregivers maintain emotional stability.
3. Enhanced Coping Skills: Counselling equips caregivers with adaptive coping mechanisms, enabling them to handle challenging situations without experiencing burnout. Techniques such as problem-solving skills, relaxation exercises, and cognitive reframing empower caregivers to navigate daily caregiving demands more effectively (Cañadas-De la Fuente et al., 2023).
4. Reduced Risk of Compassion Fatigue: Caregivers of vulnerable older adults are at high risk of compassion fatigue due to constant exposure to suffering (Figley, 2017). Counselling interventions provide emotional support and strategies for self-care, mitigating the development of compassion fatigue and promoting resilience.
5. Improved Family Relationships: Counselling supports caregivers in managing conflicts and improving communication within families. By understanding family dynamics and developing interpersonal skills,

caregivers can reduce tension and foster stronger, healthier relationships with family members and care recipients (Adelman et al., 2014).

6. Increased Knowledge and Competence: Counselling often includes psychoeducation, which increases caregivers' knowledge about age-related illnesses, caregiving techniques, and available support services. This knowledge enhances caregivers' competence and confidence, allowing them to provide more effective care (Cheng, Li, Losada, & Zhang, 2019).
7. Enhanced Emotional Resilience: Caregivers face continuous emotional challenges, and counselling helps build resilience by encouraging adaptive thinking, emotional regulation, and mindfulness practices. Resilient caregivers are better able to sustain long-term caregiving without experiencing severe emotional burnout (Cañadas-De la Fuente et al., 2023).
8. Promotion of Social Support and Networking: Counselling often connects caregivers to support groups or peer networks, providing opportunities to share experiences, exchange advice, and receive emotional support. Social support is a critical protective factor against caregiver burnout and enhances the overall caregiving experience (Chan, Chan, & Suen, 2013).

Sources of stress for caregivers working with vulnerable older adults

1. Multimorbidity and Care Recipient Health Complexity: Caring for older adults who have multiple chronic illnesses significantly contributes to caregiver stress. A recent study of family caregivers of frail older adults with multimorbidity found that higher burden is associated with lower perceived competence, less social support, and the care recipient's medical complexity (Chan et al.,2023)
2. Cognitive Impairment in Care Recipients: When the older adult has cognitive decline (e.g., dementia or other impairment), caregiver burden and stress are much higher. For example, aged caregivers of older adults with signs of cognitive impairment had significantly higher perceived stress and burden compared to those caring for cognitively healthy older adults (Kurma et al.,2025).
3. Sleep Disturbances Poor sleep quality is a major stressor. A study on caregivers of older adults with dementia in Thailand reported a positive correlation between caregiving stress and poor sleep quality (Sanprakhoh et al.,2022).
4. Emotional Strain, Anxiety, and Depression: Psychological distress, especially anxiety and depression, is strongly linked to elevated stress and caregiver burden. A structural-equation modelling study found that anxiety and depression strongly predict stress, which in turn increases burden (Hussein & Bugum, 2023).
5. Work Strain / Role Conflict: Many informal caregivers are still employed, and caregiving can interfere with work or even force people to quit early. This intersection of caregiving and paid employment significantly raises emotional stress (Schulz et al., 2021).
6. Lack of Awareness or Use of Support Resources: Some caregivers, even in professional or medical fields, report high strain partly because they are unaware of available caregiving support or do not use formal resources (Yin et al.,2023).
7. Low Social Support / Isolation: Caregivers who perceive less social support or have fewer alternative caregivers are more likely to report higher burden and distress (Lau et al, 2023).
8. Self-Health Decline and Cognitive Effects in Caregivers: There's also evidence that older caregivers themselves might experience declines in their own cognitive performance or health, particularly when caring for cognitively impaired older adults (Santos et al., 2022).

Theory of counselling needs for caregivers.

Caregivers of vulnerable older adults experience significant emotional, psychological, and physical strain, and several counselling theories help explain why they require structured support. The Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) highlights that caregiving often involves chronic stressors such as behavioural challenges, declining health of the care recipient, and role overload, which exceed an individual's coping resources. When caregivers lack effective coping strategies, they become vulnerable to anxiety, depression,

burnout, and compassion fatigue, creating a clear need for counselling interventions that provide problem-focused and emotion-focused coping skills.

Application of the Stress and Coping Theory in Managing Caregivers' Stress Working with Vulnerable Older Adults

The Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explains how individuals assess and manage stressors, making it highly relevant to caregivers of vulnerable older adults. According to the theory, caregivers constantly evaluate caregiving demands through *primary appraisal* (assessing whether a situation is stressful or overwhelming) and *secondary appraisal* (evaluating whether they have the resources to cope). Caregivers often face emotional strain, role overload, behavioural challenges from care recipients, and limited support. When the demands exceed their perceived coping resources, stress increases. Applying the theory helps identify these points of strain, enabling counsellors to assist caregivers in recognising personal stress triggers, reframing negative appraisals, and building confidence in their ability to cope.

The theory also guides intervention by distinguishing between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused strategies empower caregivers to manage the external demands of caregiving, such as improving time management, seeking respite care, or learning new caregiving skills. Emotion-focused strategies help caregivers regulate their internal emotional responses through relaxation techniques, counselling, social support, mindfulness, and stress-reduction practices. By strengthening both types of coping, caregivers become more resilient, experience reduced burnout, and are better able to provide compassionate care. This theoretical application ultimately promotes holistic well-being and enhances the quality of care provided to vulnerable older adults.

Counselling Implications

1. Caregivers of vulnerable older adults often face anticipatory grief, feelings of loss, or crises related to declining health or end-of-life situations. Counsellors should help them process these emotions, prepare psychologically, and develop effective coping mechanisms during transitions or medical emergencies.
2. Caregivers face chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. Interventions such as mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and emotional expression sessions are essential to strengthen resilience and prevent psychological decline.
3. Caregivers face challenges about ageing, chronic illnesses, dementia behaviours, and coping mechanisms. A counsellor should introduce Psychoeducation, which empowers caregivers with realistic expectations and equips them with skills to handle complex caregiving situations more confidently.
4. Caregivers face social challenges due to accumulated stress; therefore, counsellors should encourage caregivers to build and maintain social support systems, including peer support groups, family involvement, and community resources. These networks reduce isolation, promote shared experiences, and enhance emotional well-being.

Conclusion

The counselling needs of caregivers working with vulnerable older adults are both significant and multifaceted, reflecting the emotional, psychological, and practical challenges inherent in caregiving roles. As caregivers navigate demanding responsibilities often with limited support, they require structured counselling interventions that address stress management, emotional resilience, coping skills, and guidance on navigating ethical and relational complexities. Recognising and responding to these needs is essential for promoting caregiver well-being, enhancing the quality of care provided to older adults, and sustaining the long-term viability of caregiving within families and institutional settings. Ultimately, prioritising counselling support for caregivers is not only a matter of individual mental health but also a key component in strengthening elder care systems and ensuring dignified ageing for vulnerable older adults.

Suggestions

The following suggestions were made;

1. Counsellors should provide coping strategies such as relaxation techniques, mindfulness, cognitive-behavioural skills, and emotional processing to reduce burnout and promote psychological resilience.
2. Counsellors should equip caregivers with knowledge about ageing-related conditions, behavioural changes in older adults, communication techniques, and realistic expectations. This empowers caregivers to understand the caregiving process better and reduces frustration, fear, and helplessness.
3. Counsellors should help caregivers to develop time-management skills, explore social support systems, and create healthy boundaries to manage role conflict and reduce role overload.
4. Counsellors should help them process these emotions, prepare psychologically, and develop effective coping mechanisms during transitions or medical emergencies.
5. Counselling must prioritise helping caregivers manage chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. Interventions such as mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and emotional expression sessions are essential to strengthen resilience and prevent psychological decline.
6. Counsellors should provide caregivers with practical knowledge about ageing, chronic illnesses, dementia behaviours, and coping mechanisms. Psychoeducation empowers caregivers with realistic expectations and equips them with skills to handle complex caregiving situations more confidently.
7. Counselling should encourage caregivers to build and maintain social support systems, including peer support groups, family involvement, and community resources. These networks reduce isolation, promote shared experiences, and enhance emotional well-being.
8. Counsellors need to help caregivers establish healthy boundaries, balance caregiving duties with personal life, and prioritise self-care. This includes teaching time management, delegation of tasks, and recognising early signs of burnout to maintain long-term caregiving capacity.
9. Counselling for caregivers should focus on strengthening their emotional resilience, coping abilities, and overall psychological well-being. Caregivers often face chronic stress, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion, so counselling interventions should provide a safe space for the expression of feelings, process grief, and manage anxiety.
10. Counsellors can help caregivers develop effective stress-management strategies such as relaxation techniques, time-management skills, and healthy boundaries to prevent burnout. Psychoeducation is also essential, helping caregivers understand the nature of ageing, chronic illness, and end-of-life issues so they can better navigate the demands of their role.
11. Counsellors should further address the relational and practical challenges caregivers encounter. Many caregivers experience role conflict, isolation, and feelings of inadequacy, so counsellors can assist them in improving communication within the family system, strengthening social support networks, and accessing community resources.
12. Interventions should also empower caregivers to balance their caregiving responsibilities with personal needs, encouraging self-care practices and promoting problem-solving skills. Ultimately, counselling aims to enhance caregivers' emotional well-being, improve caregiving competence, and ensure better quality of care for vulnerable older adults.

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