



The University of Tehran Press

## **Qualitative Study of Effective Interventional and Management Strategies for Psychotherapists and Counselors Dealing with Difficult Clients**

**Fahimeh Bahonar<sup>1</sup> , Farnaz Abbas yazdian<sup>2</sup> , Mohammadhassan Asayesh<sup>3\*</sup> **

1. Department of Counseling, Faculty of Education and psychology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran. Email: [fahime.bahonar@edu.ui.ac.ir](mailto:fahime.bahonar@edu.ui.ac.ir)
2. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science, University of Khatam, Tehran, Iran. Email: [pazhoohanteam46@gmail.com](mailto:pazhoohanteam46@gmail.com)
3. Corresponding Author, Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Email: [asayesh@ut.ac.ir](mailto:asayesh@ut.ac.ir)

### **Extended Abstract**

#### **Aim**

This research aims to explore the experiences of Iranian therapists dealing with difficult clients and analyze the strategies they employ. The study seeks to identify both in-session and out-of-session strategies to prevent therapist burnout when working with difficult clients. Interactions with difficult clients can significantly impact the emotions and performance of counselors or therapists. Nearly all therapists encounter clients perceived as difficult due to behavioral, cognitive, or emotional aspects, which may impede the therapist's ability to deliver optimal care. Difficult clients refer to individuals who exhibit intense anger or profound sadness (Magrath, 2019). Effectively managing these clients hinges on the therapist's willingness to comprehend the underlying reasons for challenging behaviors. Additionally, it requires the therapist's capacity to intervene in a manner that mitigates negative effects, fostering a sense of safety and enhancing the efficacy of the treatment (Fisher et al., 2019).

#### **Methodology**

The present research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. To understand the lived experiences of therapists, the phenomenological method was adopted, which describes the structure or nature of life experiences and gives meaning to them, accurately depicting phenomena through daily life experiences. The research community comprised active therapists in Tehran during 2021-2022. Sampling continued purposefully until reaching saturation, resulting in the selection of 17 therapists. To minimize participant heterogeneity, inclusion criteria were established: 1) willingness to participate, 2) status as a therapist, 3) residence in Tehran, 4) experience in treating patients with personality disorders and marital and family problems (e.g., divorce, marital infidelity, spousal abuse, addiction, delinquency), and 5) more than five years of work experience. Exclusion criteria included: 1) unavailability for interview, 2) no history of difficult clients, and 3) new therapists with less than five years of experience. Subsequently, participants underwent semi-structured interviews. The main interview questions were developed by researchers in consultation with two experienced experts in the field, ensuring content validity, and were employed after experts confirmed their validity. Data analysis utilized Colaizzi's descriptive method. The research data's validity and accuracy were assessed using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### **Findings**

Participants' demographic characteristics included an age range of 28-54 years and clinical experience ranging from 5 to 20 years. Ten participants held master's degrees, and seven had PhDs. Data analysis identified 60 primary concepts, 9 sub-themes, and 2 main themes. The main themes comprised: 1) Effective strategies during sessions (including general therapeutic communication strategies, general individual strategies, specialized strategies for clients with marital problems, specialized strategies for clients with family problems, and specialized strategies for clients with personality disorders), and 2) Effective strategies outside sessions (including general social strategies, support strategies for clients

with personality disorders, management strategies for clients with marital and family problems, and general self-care strategies for therapists).

### Conclusion

Overall, this research indicates that the quality of service to difficult clients depends on therapists' strategic utilization. Therefore, proper supervision and training in this area are essential. Additionally, if treatment centers are well-resourced and meet clients' and therapists' needs, clients may not be perceived as difficult. Furthermore, strategies employed by specialists in dealing with difficult clients (e.g., those with personality disorders, marital and family problems) often remain undisclosed. Therapists and counselors may hesitate to discuss their experiences with these clients due to fear of shame and self-doubt, even with supervisors or colleagues. Managing difficult clients is an integral aspect of therapeutic practice, where therapists encounter both satisfied clients who reflect positively on their performance and challenging clients deserving of careful consideration. Thus, mastering the handling of difficult clients can significantly ease managing other clients (Baum, 2009).

**Keywords:** Counselors, Difficult clients, Psychotherapists, Qualitative method, Strategies.

### Research Ethics Considerations

Prior to conducting interviews, participants were provided with necessary explanations regarding adherence to ethical principles such as confidentiality and audio recording. After obtaining informed consent, interviews commenced, ensuring participants' right to withdraw and maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process.

**Supporting Organization:** This research did not receive support from any external organizations.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### References

- Baum, N. (2009). Dealing with difficult patients. *The Journal of Medical Practice Management: MPM*, 25(1), 6-33. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19743707/>
- Fischer, C., Cottin, M., Behn, A., Errázuriz, P., & Díaz, R. (2019). What makes a difficult patient so difficult? Examining the therapist's experience beyond patient characteristics. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 75(5), 898-911. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22765>
- Magrath, C. (2019). Dealing with difficult clients. *The Veterinary Record*, 184(11), 358-369. <https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.11194>

---

**Cite this article:** Bahonar, F., Abbas yazdian, F., & Asayesh, M. H. (2024). Qualitative Study of Effective Interventional and Management Strategies for Psychotherapists and Counselors Dealing with Difficult Clients. *Journal of Applied Psychological Research*, 14(4), 263-283. doi: 10.22059/japr.2024.353916.644507.



**Publisher:** University of Tehran Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22059/japr.2024.353916.644507>

© The Author(s).

---