

# Clinical Psychology Interns' Lived Experiences With Suicidal Clients

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the lived experiences of clinical psychology interns who have encountered suicidal clients during their internship. Employing qualitative phenomenological investigation, semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The study employed purposive sampling and gathered valuable data from 8 clinical psychology interns who were all taking a master's degree in Clinical Psychology. The results highlighted that those encounters with suicidal clients triggered various reactions among interns, leading to self-doubt and a sense of unpreparedness in handling such cases. Many interns struggled with managing their emotions, especially when clients' traumas mirrored their experiences. The study emphasized the importance of a robust support system in helping interns cope with the challenges of their work. The results included a heightened need for supervision among interns, as they faced intense emotional challenges when working with suicidal clients. Supervision emerged as a critical component in helping them process these experiences. Regular check-ins with supervisors not only provided emotional support but also offered practical strategies for managing client interactions. This guidance helped interns develop coping mechanisms and build resilience, fostering their professional growth and confidence in handling difficult cases. Despite the challenges, the interns found purpose in witnessing significant client progress and emphasized the importance of self-care and ongoing training to prepare future clinicians for similar experiences.

**Keywords:** Clinical psychology interns; Emotional coping; Suicidal clients; Supervision; Phenomenological study.

## 1.0 Introduction

In the Philippines, while the suicide rate is lower compared to many developed and developing nations, it has been increasing (Lagman et al., 2021). In 2019, the suicide rate in the Philippines was 2.5 per 100,000 population. However, during the onset and progression of the pandemic in 2020, there was a notable rise in suicide deaths, as reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA). The country's suicide rate increased by 57% compared to the previous year. According to the PSA, suicide became the 25th leading cause of death in 2020, up from 31st place in 2019. In 2020, 4,420 individuals died by suicide, compared to 2,810 deaths in 2019 (Philstar, 2020).

Therapists' professional competence plays a critical role in suicide prevention, and when a client dies by suicide, therapists often experience a profound sense of failure associated with it (Rossouw et al., 2011). In a study conducted by Dexter-Mazza and Freeman (2011), the results revealed that around 5% of participants reported a client suicide, while 99% noted they had worked with at least one suicidal client during their graduate training.

Furthermore, in a study conducted by Beevers (2018), the researcher found that their reactions grew more intense and complex as the student therapists anticipated meeting the client for the first time. They expressed a range of emotional responses, with the most powerful feelings being worry and concern regarding the client's history of suicide attempts and the possibility of her current suicidal tendencies. Trainee counselors commonly express the feeling of being inadequately prepared to respond effectively when they encounter clients experiencing suicidal ideation (Elston, 2018). Understanding these emotional impacts is crucial for developing effective support and supervision strategies for interns.

Bennett-Levy's (2006) cognitive model for therapist skill development emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in developing therapeutic skills, making it particularly relevant for clinical psychology interns. It encourages interns to self-reflect, receive supervisor feedback, and manage their emotional responses, enhancing their effectiveness. This structured approach helps trainees build confidence and competence, especially when working with challenging cases like suicidal clients.

Despite growing research into the effects of client suicides on mental health professionals, there remains a significant gap in understanding how clinical psychology interns handle these experiences. Most existing studies focus on experienced professionals, underscoring the need for further investigation into interns' immediate reactions and coping strategies. Addressing this gap could improve training programs and support systems, helping interns manage their emotional challenges and maintain their effectiveness in client care. This research will contribute to better practices for suicide risk assessment and intervention, benefiting both interns and the broader mental health community.

## **2.0 Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Design**

The study aimed to explore the firsthand experiences of clinical psychology interns who have encountered suicidal clients during their internship, using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the research method. IPA was selected for its ability to provide deep insights into sensitive and complex experiences by focusing on participants' perspectives and how they make sense of their interactions (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This approach emphasizes detailed descriptions of "lived experiences" (Alase, 2017) rather than theory development or hypothesis testing.

### **2.2 Research Participants**

The researcher used purposive sampling to select participants who met specific criteria. The participants in this study were enrolled in a Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology program and were actively engaged in their internship placements when the data was collected. All participants in the study were also women. Notably, in terminal master's-level psychology programs, women outnumber men, comprising 78 percent compared to 22 percent. In certain subfields, the proportion of women to men at the master's level is even greater than at the doctoral level (Fowler et al., 2018).

### **2.3 Research Instrument**

This study employed a semi-structured interview format with validated open-ended questions to collect in-depth data on participants' experiences managing suicidal clients, centered around the primary question, "How was your experience handling suicidal clients?" An interview guide was used to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research problem and to assist the researcher in probing for further details and clarification. To facilitate the data analysis, the researcher recorded the interviews with participant consent and transcribed and coded the data.

### **2.4 Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were gathered through in-depth online interviews conducted via video conferencing, which allowed participants to discuss their experiences in detail. Participants were recruited through social media, completed a Google form to assess eligibility, and provided informed consent before the interviews. The sessions, lasting 40 to 60 minutes, were guided by questions validated by licensed psychologists, recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

The data analysis for this study followed a structured process beginning with a thorough immersion in the transcribed interviews. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts, making preliminary notes to gain a deep understanding of the data. Initial codes were generated through open coding, which involved breaking the data into manageable segments and identifying significant units using an inductive, bottom-up approach. These codes were then systematically organized to form overarching themes, reflecting meaningful patterns related to the research question. The process emphasized flexibility in theme definition, allowing codes to be grouped into broader themes and continuously reviewed for alignment with the data.

The study employed several validation techniques to ensure the credibility of the findings. Participant validation involved presenting preliminary analyses to participants for feedback, enhancing the reliability of interpretations. Additionally, validation from qualitative research and IPA experts was sought, including input from registered psychologists and a licensed professional teacher with experience in guidance and counseling. Peer debriefing also played a role, with a colleague reviewing the study to provide alternative perspectives and improve the accuracy of the interpretations. The final analysis was documented in a detailed write-up, incorporating these methodological rigor and validation approaches to ensure a comprehensive and credible understanding of the research topic.

## **2.5 Ethical Considerations**

Prior to commencing data collection, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the PUP-GS Research Ethics Committee to ensure adherence to established ethical standards in qualitative research. The study also adhered to the principles of research ethics outlined by the American Psychological Association, particularly emphasizing informed consent rules. Participants were provided detailed information about the study, including its objectives, duration, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, their right to decline participation or withdraw without consequences, contact information for queries, and consent to publish study data.

Confidentiality and privacy were maintained by explaining the limits of confidentiality, clarifying data usage and handling, securing participant consent, and assigning pseudonyms to protect identities. Additionally, a distress protocol was implemented to mitigate potential harm if participants became distressed during the interview. Participants were informed of their voluntary participation rights, including the option to withdraw or take breaks as needed. They were encouraged to ask questions and voice concerns about the research procedure before the interview. The consent form also assured access to an on-call psychologist provided by the researcher in case of any challenges arising from discussing participants' experiences.

## **3.0 Results and Discussion**

### **Theme 1: Personal and Emotional Impact**

Interactions with suicidal clients deeply impact clinical psychology interns, extending beyond professional boundaries to affect them personally. These encounters compel interns to reflect on their skills, personal beliefs, and vulnerabilities, fostering greater empathy and self-awareness. The emotional and psychological demands of working with suicidal clients often lead to significant personal growth, prompting interns to reassess their views on life, death, and the human condition. This introspection enhances their understanding of themselves and highlights the interconnectedness of personal and professional identities. Such reflective experiences are crucial for interns' development, enriching their professional practice and nurturing their growth into compassionate and effective mental health practitioners.

### ***Emerging of Caring Behaviors***

The interns often face significant discomfort and self-doubt when dealing with clients expressing suicidal ideation, feeling inadequately prepared, and questioning their clinical skills. This discomfort highlights a widespread need for enhanced preparation and support as interns grapple with the complexities of managing such high-stakes situations. A common concern among interns is the fear of providing inadequate interventions to clients experiencing suicidal ideation. This lack of confidence in their ability to deliver effective care indicates a perceived deficiency in their professional competence. As the interns recounted:

*"Well, it is the self-doubt and inadequacy because I am just an intern. In counseling sessions, I often think about what I should do in that moment when the client is telling me they want to die." – CAF*

Interns dealing with clients who express suicidal ideation often experience significant discomfort and self-doubt due to feelings of inadequate preparation and concerns about their clinical skills. This anxiety stems from the high-stakes nature of these situations, where the fear of providing insufficient interventions can lead to a crisis of confidence and identity. Literature reflects these challenges, with trainees and clinicians alike reporting intense negative emotions—such as anxiety, fear, and self-criticism—when working with suicidal clients. Fogarty and colleagues (2023) documented these adverse emotions, while Jacobson et al. (2004, as cited by Hawgood, 2015) found that female therapists, in particular, experience higher distress, shame, and intrusive symptoms following a client's death. Such findings underscore the emotional toll on interns and the necessity for improved training and support in handling these critical encounters.

### ***Uncovering Interns' Personal Experiences***

Some interns experienced unexpected emotional triggers when confronted with their clients' traumas and life stories, especially when these experiences mirrored their own, particularly within family contexts. This mirroring can evoke strong feelings, leading to heightened emotional responses and difficulty maintaining professional boundaries. Hunter (2015) suggests that clinicians' attitudes can be shaped by their encounters with mental health challenges and suicide. One intern narrated how she was able to relate to her client:

*"One case is suicidal clients that I relate to more because mine is also family-related. Relating to the most stressful case that I have mentioned, I can now understand the client better because I have been there; I could not trust my family. I do not know if I could get their [family] support, that fear so that I can understand him better."* – ME

These interactions stirred profound personal emotions as interns grappled with maintaining professional detachment while resonating personally. Specifically, situations where clients' difficulties mirrored interns' family dynamics significantly affected them, leading to introspection and fostering empathy in their therapeutic methods.

### ***Realizations on Life and Death***

Living and dying are complex and multifaceted and can be viewed differently. Since working with suicidal clients, some of the participants have come to see life as something to be cherished and appreciated. When it comes to death, the interns realized that people have different views and that death may seem like an easier option for some. One of the interns felt that life is unfair because some people experience significantly harder and more painful things.

*"...in life, I have realized that some people have had such extreme experiences. It is so unfair. Why is it like that? I mean, I have had struggles too, but my life seems so much easier compared to theirs."* – BR

This understanding made them more empathetic towards their clients, as they acknowledged the varied and complex reasons behind suicidal thoughts. Hupp (2017) noted that several factors affect how people perceive and respond to death. These include age, just world views, the value of human life, belief in an afterlife, preparedness, and the perceived tragedy of death.

## **Theme 2: Personal Experience and Client Encounters**

Engaging with clients in suicidal crises is a significant occupational challenge for counselors, recognized as one of the most demanding aspects of the profession due to the increasing incidence of suicide and its profound impact on both personal and professional levels (Veilleux, 2011). This challenge is particularly intense for clinical psychology interns, who are still developing their professional skills and confidence. Despite these difficulties, the dedication of interns to their clients can lead to meaningful progress as they observe growth and resilience, even in small steps. These moments of progress offer hope and reinforce the interns' sense of purpose, highlighting the transformative potential of their work and providing powerful affirmations of their commitment.

### ***Facing Complexities in Client Encounters***

Clinical psychology interns often face significant emotional and professional challenges when managing suicidal cases, especially during their initial encounters. These first interactions can be particularly daunting, as interns

experience heightened anxiety from the fear of making critical mistakes and uncertainty about appropriate interventions.

*"Since it is my first time talking to someone [with suicidal tendencies] directly, it is panic-inducing, like, 'Oh no, what am I going to do?' All I know is how to conduct therapy on a day-to-day basis or handle daily concerns, so I do not know what to do when I receive pictures and videos full of blood." –AP*

The gravity of these initial sessions is underscored by the understanding that they represent a crucial opportunity for effective intervention and treatment, as noted by Firestone (2014). Interns approach these sessions with high motivation to instill hope and aid clients in envisioning a positive future (Ignacio & Tudy, 2020). However, given their developing skills and confidence, the responsibility can feel overwhelming. Navigating the balance between providing immediate support and maintaining professional boundaries presents a steep learning curve, making the early experiences of working with suicidal clients especially challenging for interns.

**Awareness of the Client's Improved Functioning.** People struggling with suicidal thoughts often find it difficult to seek mental health assistance because of the typical reactions they receive from their family and friends. Therapists aim to establish a sense of connection and value in clients, assisting them in cultivating crucial skills for emotional regulation (Firestone, 2014). Interns play a crucial role in this process, and their involvement in their client's progress during a crisis profoundly impacts them. The interns experienced a sense of fulfillment and relief when they witnessed their clients' progress, knowing that their efforts were making a tangible difference in someone's life.

*"I guess when they start to be more open about their experiences because at first, they were really resistant and guarded, there is some sort of relief once they begin to open up." – CF*

This relief and fulfillment are rooted not only in professional achievements but also in the personal growth and emotional rewards that come from positively impacting someone's life. As they strive to establish a strong therapeutic connection, interns learn to facilitate emotional regulation skills in their clients, which can be challenging and rewarding. Witnessing clients make progress during crises can lead to a profound sense of fulfillment and relief for interns, reinforcing their sense of purpose and competence in their roles.

### **Theme 3: Clinical Decision-Making and Practice**

Bennett-Levy (2006) emphasized that the true measure of counselors' competency lies in their ability to practically apply acquired knowledge and reflective attitudes in real-life client interactions, a process known as the procedural system. For clinical psychology interns, this involves transitioning from theoretical classroom learning to the unpredictable realities of clinical practice, where they must effectively address clients' complex needs. As interns gain experience, their confidence grows, but they often encounter challenges, particularly with difficult cases like clients exhibiting suicidal tendencies. The support of clinical supervisors is crucial in these situations, as they provide both technical and emotional support. This collaborative mentorship helps interns navigate the complexities of their cases, ensuring they can deliver effective and ethical care. Ultimately, this integration of theoretical knowledge, practical application, and supervisory support fosters the development of competent, compassionate, and resilient mental health professionals.

#### ***Clinical Supervision and Providing Support***

Weaver (2020) emphasizes that supervision is essential in bridging the gap between academic training and professional practice, offering crucial support, mentorship, and constructive challenges. One of the interns said,

*"...we also had simulations where our supervising psychologist would ask, aside from the simulation, when a client says something like this, what might we ask them, uh... aside from the very basic questions, how else can we get them to share or elicit their feelings and thoughts." – BR*

These sessions help interns navigate their roles and responsibilities, providing a structured environment for processing their experiences and addressing difficulties. The interns frequently value the guidance and feedback from their supervisors, recognizing it as a key component in their growth and effectiveness as mental health

professionals. They also consistently appreciated supervision's role in their professional growth and readiness. The supportive relationships they develop with their supervisors significantly improve their confidence and competence in clinical settings.

### ***Confronting Communication Challenges***

Clinical psychology interns often face difficulties when working with clients who are reserved or hesitant to communicate openly, particularly on sensitive topics such as suicidality. Interns report that clients frequently struggle to disclose their problems or emotions, which can pose significant challenges during therapy.

*"Many clients are not open to talking about suicidal cases, so they do not all feel comfortable sharing what they have done. There are often many interviews before they open up about it, and that is the main challenge I have faced." – KS*

Establishing a trusting and supportive therapeutic relationship is crucial for creating a safe, non-judgmental environment that encourages clients to express their thoughts and feelings more openly. This supportive setting is essential in psychotherapy for helping clients authentically confront and reflect on their difficult life issues (Kolden et al., 2018).

### ***Respecting Confidentiality Boundaries***

When working with suicidal clients, professionals, including interns, must handle personal and sensitive information carefully to protect client privacy. Interns emphasized that maintaining confidentiality is crucial as it supports developing and sustaining a strong therapeutic rapport with their clients, aligning with their most significant ethical concern during practice.

*"What else, of course, confidentiality? That is really what I always... I only disclose information to the social worker and those directly involved in the case." – BP*

The interns have consistently prioritized confidentiality as a crucial ethical consideration. They understand that adhering to confidentiality protocols is fundamental to establishing and maintaining a positive therapeutic relationship with their clients. This commitment underscores their professional responsibility to uphold privacy standards, ensuring that clients feel safe and secure in sharing their concerns without fear of judgment or unauthorized disclosure.

### ***Awareness of Client's Facilitating Factors***

The interns frequently incorporate practical techniques to redirect clients' focus away from suicidal thoughts. Strategies such as engaging in physical activities like exercise, practicing relaxation and breathing techniques, or journaling have proven effective in helping clients manage distress. One of the interns said she gives her client another perspective and a healthier approach.

*"I sometimes offer them another perspective, like, 'Hey, this is not the only way; maybe this could work too.' It helps them realize, 'Oh, okay, that is an option.' Like us, we often look at things directly, but when someone suggests, 'Hey, you have this option,' it makes you think, 'Ah, that is possible.' So I try to give that to my clients too, letting them know that they are not limited to just one choice and that there are other options they might be overlooking." – CF*

These activities not only serve as immediate coping mechanisms but also empower clients to regain a sense of control over their emotions and circumstances. The positive impact of these interventions is often evident during follow-up sessions, where clients demonstrate improved emotional regulation and a reduced intensity of suicidal thoughts. This approach aligns with research findings by Stanley and colleagues (2021), which highlight the efficacy of distraction and positive activity-based strategies in mitigating suicidal ideation.

## **Theme 4: Support and Self-Care**

Amid the dynamic setting of their internship, colleagues' support and self-care emerge as crucial elements in maintaining the well-being of these interns. As they navigate the complex terrain of clinical practice, they derive comfort and resilience from their peers, fostering a culture of mutual support and empathy. Despite the demands

of their internship, they prioritize self-care, acknowledging its significance in enhancing their ability to support clients effectively.

### ***Sources of Social Support Within the Field***

A study by Jones and Thompson (2017) underscored the significance of seeking support in coping with the challenges inherent in training and professional development. For the interns, having peers and colleagues who understand their experiences fosters a sense of solidarity and provides a safe space to discuss work-related concerns, emotions, and stressors.

*"So, besides the weekly supervision where I discuss my case, I also ask my co-interns, especially after counseling, because I sometimes need to share my experiences with them to debrief myself..." - CF*

They have consistently highlighted the importance of feeling supported in their professional environment. This support system acts as a buffer against the negative effects of stress by offering practical solutions, reframing perceptions of challenges, and promoting emotional regulation.

### ***Exploring Self-care Practices***

The growing influence of positive psychology has underscored the importance of self-care as a pivotal concept. Recognized for its ability to alleviate stress, improve professional performance, and foster overall well-being among mental health professionals (Dorociak et al., 2017), self-care has become increasingly prominent. Interns prioritize activities related to personal interests and hobbies as part of their self-care regimen. Engaging in activities they enjoy, whether exercising, reading, or creative pursuits, allows interns to recharge mentally and emotionally. These activities are crucial in fostering work-life balance and preventing emotional exhaustion, which is essential for sustained professional engagement.

*"...whenever I handle clients, I rest, sleep, or read books afterward. That reading helps me a lot." - KS*

### ***Equipping Future Mental Health Professionals***

The interns advocated for structured workshops and training programs specifically designed to prepare them for handling suicidal clients. They highlighted the importance of these programs in providing practical skills and strategies for crisis intervention.

*"...maybe workshops, more focused on workshops first. We need workshops so that before dealing with clients, they already know how to handle them." - KA*

By participating in workshops and trainings focused on suicide prevention, assessment, and management, future interns can gain insight into recognizing warning signs, assessing risk levels, and implementing appropriate interventions to mitigate the risk of suicide. Montague, Cassidy, and Liles (2016) emphasize that such training improves professionals' competence and boosts their confidence in handling crisis situations.

### ***Maintaining Motivation in the Clinical Field***

The interns expressed a deep sense of fulfillment in their work. They acknowledged the challenging nature of clinical practice while remaining committed to making a meaningful impact. The interns' dedication is fuelled by the understanding that their skills and compassion are invaluable in addressing mental health issues, particularly those related to suicide prevention.

*"It motivates me because people need help, and I want to help them. I want them to understand mental health better, especially now that we are just starting to accept that concept, which is still progressing..." - AP*

Witnessing first-hand the profound need for mental health support and realizing the potential to contribute positively to clients' lives reinforces their motivation. The interns' dedication is fueled by the understanding that their skills and compassion are invaluable in addressing mental health issues, particularly those related to suicide prevention. According to Hill and colleagues (2013), motivations such as altruism, the desire to effect positive change in individuals' lives and society at large, and the opportunity to help others who have faced similar

hardships are pivotal in attracting students to careers in clinical psychology. These motivations resonate strongly with the experiences shared by interns during their interviews.

## 4.0 Conclusion

The study has highlighted the significant impact that working with suicidal clients has on clinical psychology interns, affecting both their personal and professional lives. Through detailed interviews, several key themes emerged, including interns' personal and emotional challenges, how their experiences influence their therapeutic practice, and the importance of clinical decision-making and support systems. Interns often report feeling unprepared when confronted with clients expressing suicidal thoughts, leading to heightened anxiety, fear, and self-doubt. Their personal experiences, especially those related to family dynamics, influence their therapeutic approach, fostering increased empathy and revealing personal biases.

The experiences with suicidal clients have deepened interns' understanding of life's fragility and complexity, making them more sensitive and nuanced in their support. Despite the inherent difficulties, interns play a crucial role in fostering hope and progress through their empathetic and collaborative efforts. The improvement they observe in their clients' lives validates their methods and enhances their professional confidence and fulfillment. Interns use evidence-based strategies to manage crises, build resilience, and support mental health recovery, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive approach to therapy.

Additionally, the study underscores the critical role of supervision and support systems in the interns' professional development. Supervision provides essential mentorship and helps interns bridge the gap between academic learning and practical application, addressing ethical dilemmas and complexities. Building trusting therapeutic relationships with clients, particularly those who are reserved or difficult to communicate with, is essential for effective therapy. Support networks and self-care practices are vital for managing the stresses of internships, maintaining ethical integrity, and ensuring long-term engagement in their work. The research concludes by emphasizing the importance of thorough training, ongoing education, and robust support systems in preparing interns to navigate the challenges of clinical practice and contribute meaningfully to mental health care.

The study's limitations: It specifically included graduate students in clinical psychology currently undertaking supervised internships as part of their curriculum, without any age restrictions or gender preferences for participants. However, all respondents happened to be women, which could potentially influence the outcomes. Furthermore, by examining the lived experiences of the clinical psychology interns, the interns should engage in continuing professional development to enhance their skills in handling suicidal clients. This includes attending workshops, seminars, and peer supervision to stay updated with evidence-based practices. Clinical psychology professors should also incorporate extensive training on crisis intervention and suicide prevention into their coursework to prepare students for the emotional and ethical challenges of working with suicidal clients. Emphasizing self-care strategies, such as mindfulness, exercise, and boundary-setting, is essential for fostering emotional resilience among future professionals. Training facilities and supervisors are encouraged to enhance intern preparation through specialized workshops and simulations, providing hands-on experience and promoting regular supervision for ongoing support. Additionally, educational institutions should ensure faculty receive continuing education on current best practices in suicide prevention while regularly assessing the effectiveness of training programs using stakeholder feedback. Future research should consider longitudinal studies that combine quantitative measures and qualitative interviews to understand better how interns' experiences and coping strategies evolve.

## 5.0 Contributions of Authors

Elaine L. Elayda conceived the research question, wrote and drafted the manuscript, collected and analyzed the data, and handled the revisions.

Dr. John Mark S. Distor provided technical support, contributed to interpreting results, and reviewed the manuscript.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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