

# Supporting the emotion work of camp counsellors

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Camp counsellors' employment experiences are full of emotional highs and lows; the thrill of connecting with campers to the fatigue of long hours and physical activity. Camp counsellors must navigate complex relationships in the fulfilment

of their roles and this places emotional demands on them. This study considers the emotion work that camp counsellors do and the effect this has on their well-being. It offers insights to how camp managers can support their staff better.

**Thematic analysis**

**of 38**  
**In-Depth Interviews**  
**with camp counsellors**

*Four themes emerged in regard to camp counsellors' experiences of emotion work:*



## The Happiness Bubble

**“It’s not all sunshine and lollipops” (David)**

There is an expectation that camp counsellors will embody and/or perform “happiness” in all interactions with campers. This is seen to be essential in ensuring that camp culture remains positive. This is not always possible and creates atenuous pressures for staff. One participant suggested that the “happy bubble” that “people” talk about is, in “reality,” “a fragile bubble, and it can burst so easily.”

## No time for emotional recovery or processing

**“Personal time is overrated” (Sophie)**

There is very little private time at camp. Consequently, camp counsellors have very little time to process, rest and recover from the emotional demands of their roles. Camp counsellors often downgrade personal needs and self-care in order to manage the expectations for and limitations created by the role.



## The social pressure of camp community

**“Everything is more intense” (Beth)**

This theme explores the intensity and challenges of social relationships among camp staff. With limited opportunities to rest or break from expected emotional displays, camp community can become a “social pressure cooker” (Beth). In camp communities, this means that grievances and gossip can be reinforced rather than relieved.

## Expectations of genuine (but obligated) care

**“You are going to care about these kids” (Zoey)**

There is an assumption that camp counsellors are going to automatically care for campers; that it will “just happen.” This isn’t always the case. Camp counsellors are faced with the challenges of obligated but, also, genuine care for campers.



By recognising the unique demands of camp counsellor employment, employers and industry leaders are obliged to reconsider employment practices. For example, how can camp counsellors be rostered to ensure they gain sufficient mental and emotional rest? Or, how can staff manuals be written in

ways that help emotional processing? Practical solutions can be small, inexpensive and creative or can take on a whole new way of thinking. Regardless of approach, strategies should be context specific and responsive to the uniqueness of their service, resources and staff.