

Strengthening the Ethical Foundation of Counseling

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The work of a counselor is multifaceted and demands a strong foundation. Counselors must align their practice with their own values to establish a genuine therapeutic alliance that fosters trust and facilitates client growth. Besides these crucial aspects, counselors also hold the responsibility to protect client rights, employing ethical and legal guidelines to safeguard client confidentiality and promote autonomy. They must also bear the duty to warn and protect individuals who may be at risk of harm from themselves or others. Maintaining accurate and comprehensive client records is essential in providing consistent care, monitoring progress, and assessing treatment outcomes. Each of these components plays an integral role in shaping the ethical practice of counseling and ensuring that clients receive the utmost care and support they deserve.

PART ONE

A counselor's role is to protect the rights and well-being of their clients. This involves ensuring client confidentiality, creating a safe and supportive environment, and respecting client autonomy. They bear the responsibility to warn and protect individuals who may be at risk of harm from themselves or others. This duty extends to taking necessary actions to ensure the safety of the client and those around them. To fulfill their duties effectively, counselors maintain comprehensive and accurate client records. These records enable them to monitor progress, assess treatment outcomes, and ensure consistent care. The combination of protecting client rights, fulfilling the responsibility to warn and protect, and maintaining thorough client records is crucial in providing ethical and effective counseling services.

The Counselor's Role in Protecting Client Rights

Clinical mental health counselors play a crucial role in helping individuals navigate the challenges of mental health issues and emotional well-being. According to “Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions” by Corey, Corey, and Corey (2019), one of the fundamental ethical responsibilities as a counselor is to ensure that they “do no harm” while promoting the well-being of their clients. This can be done so through allowing patient autonomy,

“Autonomy,” as outlined in Corey, Corey, and Corey’s book, refers to respecting a client’s right to decide about their own life and treatment. Counselors incorporate this principle by fostering a therapeutic environment where clients feel safe expressing their thoughts and preferences. Informed consent, a critical aspect emphasized in the book, ensures clients have all the information necessary to make choices about their treatment.

The principle of “non-maleficence” requires that counselors refrain from causing harm to their clients. According to Corey, Corey, and Corey, counselors are diligent in avoiding actions or interventions that could lead to emotional, psychological, or physical harm to their clients. They carefully assess and monitor any potential risks associated with treatment approaches and make adjustments accordingly. Counselors should also alert to any countertransference issues, a topic discussed in the book, that may negatively impact the therapeutic relationship and promptly address them to prevent harm.

In *Becoming an ethical helping professional: cultural and philosophical foundations* by Rita Sommers-Flanagan and John Sommers-Flanagan, Beneficence, involves actively promoting the well-being of clients and striving to do good. In line with this principle, counselors aim to maximize the positive impact of their interventions through evidence-based practices and personalized treatment plans.

Equity, or recognizing the need for equity, is vital to building a trusting therapeutic relationship and can enhance one's experience in providing fidelity. The authors emphasize that "Fidelity, also known as the principle of loyalty and trustworthiness, involves maintaining a strong and ethical therapeutic relationship with clients." By setting clear boundaries, maintaining confidentiality, and adhering to professional standards, counselors create an environment where clients feel safe discussing sensitive topics and collaboratively working toward their goals.

When speaking on informed consent, the authors state, "Clients may know exactly what they are being charged for and agree to it willingly." It is crucial for a counselor or practice not only to maintain transparency but also to prevent potential disputes, ultimately protecting clinicians against accusations of overcharging, unfair financial practices, or other potentially unfair client policies.

HIPAA compliance is essential in the healthcare industry to safeguard the confidentiality and security of patient information. The informed consent process, as per the ACA Code of Ethics, aligns with HIPAA principles by ensuring that "clients are aware of their rights concerning the privacy of their healthcare data" (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2015). Clients are informed about how their information will be used, disclosed, and protected under HIPAA regulations. This alignment is crucial for maintaining client trust, as they can feel assured that their personal health information will be handled in a "legally compliant and secure manner" (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2015).

Clinical professionals must adhere to credentialing board requirements. These requirements, according to the Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners, uphold ethical standards and protect client rights. Credentialing boards set guidelines for informed consent,

ensuring that clients are “well-informed about their treatment.” Adhering to these requirements not only ensures legal compliance but also upholds professional integrity.

Responsibility to Warn and Protect

According to Corey, Corey, and Corey, counselors are directed by ethical principles, including “beneficence and non-maleficence,” as outlined in the ACA Code of Ethics. These principles cause counselors prioritize “the welfare of their clients and society while avoiding harm” (Corey, Corey, Corey, 2017). Specifically, when faced with the “duty to warn,” counselors are called upon to evaluate situations in which a client poses a “serious threat of harm to themselves or others.” The duty to protect extends this obligation, requiring them to intervene and take essential measures to prevent the harm from occurring. The significance of legal considerations, as articulated in “Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions,” cannot be understated. The book indicates that the laws surrounding “duty to warn” and “duty to protect” exhibit variations from one state to another. Counselors must diligently inform themselves about the specific legal requirements of the state in which they intend to practice and live in.

Client Record-Keeping

Maintaining “accurate and comprehensive client records,” according to Sommers-Flanagan’s book, is essential for upholding a client’s right to professional care. These records encompass “the client’s history, assessment, treatment plan, progress, and any changes in their condition.” Such information guarantees that clients receive the most suitable and effective treatment while enabling counselors to monitor and adapt their interventions as necessary. These records provide a foundation for accountability, which is crucial in addressing any disputes or questions regarding the care provided.

Secure storage of electronic files and documents, as recommended by Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, is a critical facet of record keeping. Counselors are compelled to implement robust safeguards to protect client information from unauthorized access, breaches, or loss. This includes the implementation of encryption, password protection, and adherence to pertinent data protection regulations, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in the United States.

PART TWO

Counselors not only take care of the well-being of their clients, but they also recognize the importance of self-care in maintaining their own mental and emotional health. Self-care for counselors entails engaging in activities that promote personal well-being and prevent burnout, such as exercise, therapy, and stress management techniques. Counselors understand the significance of advocating for the counseling profession. They work to raise awareness about the importance of mental health and fight the stigma surrounding seeking therapy. Advocacy efforts may include taking part in professional organizations, educating the public, and supporting policy changes. By ensuring that their work is in line with their personal beliefs and principles, counselors can provide more genuine support and establish a stronger therapeutic alliance with their clients. Ultimately, by prioritizing self-care, advocating for the counseling profession, and aligning with counselor values, counselors can continue to provide effective and compassionate care to their clients.

Self-Care

The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) is an esteemed organization that provides ethical guidelines for professional counselors. These codes of ethics serve as the moral compass for counselors, offering insights into how they should conduct themselves

professionally. In Section C, “Professional Responsibility,” of these codes of ethics, self-care emerges as a fundamental aspect of maintaining a counselor’s well-being. To maintain a healthy balance between professional and personal life, I plan to implement several strategies. First, I will establish clear boundaries by setting limits on working hours, regular physical activity, meditation, and mindfulness practices. I will also prioritize quality time with my family and friends to ensure emotional support.

In my life, I have engaged in various self-care activities, such as regular exercise, somatic healing and breathwork, practicing mindfulness meditation with various apps, and seeking mentorship from experienced colleagues both online and in-person. These activities have helped to alleviate stress, further educating me and enhancing my overall well-being. I also actively take part in art therapy and nature walks when the Arizona temperatures are suited for such. A huge element of self-care that I put above all else are my own needs in therapy. I see an EMDR and IFS therapist, a group therapist, and a psychotherapist. My mental health is very important to me and my continued success as a person.

The Counseling Community Connections website provides an extensive Counselor and Counseling Resource List. This resource offers access to professional counselors, supervision, support groups, and continuing education opportunities. Seeking guidance from experienced colleagues within the local counseling community can be a valuable source of support.

According to Dr. Noe Vargas, “It is student-centered and will improve our students’ experience in their programs. And it is an example of collaboration between online and ground faculty,”

Advocacy

To advocate for the counseling profession at the governmental level, the American Counseling Association (ACA) provides valuable resources. This platform offers opportunities

for counselors to engage in advocacy and become vocal champions for the profession. One population I am passionate about is LGBTQIA+ community members and those living with psychotic disorders. To get involved, I can support or take part in initiatives that aim to ensure equal rights, access to counseling, and safe spaces for all LGBTQIA+ community members and work on publicly broadcasted education about those living with psychotic disorders. This involvement could include lobbying for policies that protect LGBTQIA+ students and trans folks, advocating for proper treatment and support for those living with psychotic disorders, and working with local LGBTQIA+ organizations, like One-in-Ten, to provide counseling services to youth and adults alike.

The “Social Justice Statement” in the Counselor in Training Handbook speaks about the ethical responsibilities that counselors have in advocating for their profession and clients. The statement emphasizes the ethical obligation to promote social justice, equity, and access to counseling services for all individuals. According to the *Counselor in Training Handbook*, “Being an empowering advocate for individuals that are marginalized, oppressed, and experiencing barriers is essential to our profession and professional roles.” This aligns with the way I publicly speak on social media about mental health and the two major populations I seek to serve.

Counselor Values

In alignment with the American Counseling Association’s (ACA) Code of Ethics, my values and attitudes toward the 19-year-old rape victim seeking an abortion are guided by a commitment to promoting client welfare, autonomy, and informed decision-making. ACA’s Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of respecting clients’ rights to self-determination (A.2.a) and safeguarding their well-being (A.4.a).

To work with the client, I would create a therapeutic environment that fosters trust and safety (A.11.a), providing her with accurate, science-based information while offering emotional support (A.11.b). It is essential to respect her cultural and religious beliefs while emphasizing the importance of her autonomy (E.5.a). It is important to note here that the 19-year-old client is an adult, fully capable of making her own decisions regardless of her parent's opinions. Should her parents remain opposed to her decision, my role is to continue supporting the client's autonomy, consistent with ACA's Code of Ethics (A.4.b).

Conclusion

Counselor self-care, advocacy for the counseling profession, and alignment with counselor values have a profound impact on the effectiveness and ethical practice of counseling. By prioritizing self-care, counselors ensure they are mentally and emotionally equipped to provide the best support to their clients. Advocacy efforts help to raise awareness about mental health and reduce the stigma associated with seeking therapy, fostering a more supportive environment for individuals in need. The counselor's role in protecting client rights, fulfilling the responsibility to warn and protect, and maintaining comprehensive client records are paramount to delivering ethical and effective counseling services. By upholding these responsibilities, counselors create a safe and supportive environment that promotes the well-being of their clients and upholds the quality and integrity of the counseling profession.

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