Marcus Thigpen

Ethical and Legal Considerations of the Developing Counselor

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Dr. Dara Brown

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Future counselors must understand the importance of continued professional growth. The world is continually evolving and as society accepts the differences that individuals bring, counselors must remain educated and steadfast in their ethical boundaries. Counselors must adhere to counseling dispositions as well. Counselors tend to be empathetic, and this sometimes lead to unethical practices even if it’s for a good cause. They must always be aware and sure to revisit ethical boundaries frequently to make sure they are compliant.

One way that this could happen is offering volunteer work to clients. Treat pro bono and paid work the same. Don’t get sloppy just because you’re not billing the client or an insurer, says Howell. For example, informed consent and proper documentation of treatment and progress are still required (Clay, 2017). Along with proper documentation, counselors must have the same energy and respect during volunteerism as they would a paid client. Many businesses and companies start by giving away things to build around their product or service. Counselors could essentially start out their career doing those same things. Offering clients, a service that helps them gives the counselor practice reps as well. There will always be people in this world that can’t afford to pay for services, and if they come knocking at a counselor’s door with dyer needs, though you are not ethically obligated to take them in, the reward of saving someone’s life is worth the cost alone.

When working with a population that is underserved, or in poverty, these cases could become a normal occurrence. Sharing personal information with a client during treatment can be helpful or harmful, (Sutton, 2021). Counselors shouldn’t start sessions disclosing things about themselves but taking the time to get to know their client. The key is to build rapport, make the space in which they are in safe, comfortable, and a place they want to be in. From there, it’s about finding the need behind the need. Sharing too abruptly could harm a client, because they could take it as the counselor not truly understanding them but projected their thoughts on how they feel and that could be re-traumatizing. It’s a delicate balance in which a therapist should share, but if it creates a positive response, this would be a successful share, and the client would want to return and continue treatment.

When clients return and get treatment, counselors must remain objective in their approach. It’s easy to be subjective because as human beings, they tend to rely on their own personal experiences to give advice or opinions. While this may seem right, without having facts, they could be teetering the line of unethical practices. Therapist’s must give their clients facts as they are in sessions. Facts on the things they are experiencing and what the process looks like, based on peer reviewed rigorous research. If a counselor cannot remain objective, this may affect the quality of the counseling relationship and has the potential to harm the client, (Natwick, 2017). Knowing that being objective could harm the client, it’s imperative to state facts over feelings. When being diagnosed at a doctor visit based off symptoms and the doctor utilizing what knowledge they have, may prescribe medicine you with something that looks familiar and could be completely different is a huge mistake. The patient is now taking medication for something that could make the symptoms worse and it’s because proper tests weren’t ran. This is how a counselor could use their subjective opinions without taking a deeper dive to truly understand their clients and their needs.

This could be a daunting task at times and working with people that bring in complex trauma could start to take a toll on a counselor. As much as they like to assist and help others, they must be sure to take care of themselves. This career path is an uphill battle with a lot of challenges and the need is so vast with few very workers comparatively. Unfortunately, this is the recipe for total burnout, compassion fatigue and worse, and could traumatize a counselor in the midst. Some ways to avoid burnout would be to try mindfulness, change the way you think about work, get moving, seek social support, get political, and unplug both technologically, and mentally (Clay, 2018). Counselors can avoid some of these by being proactive in their approach. Counselors should get into a habit of self-care before they start their counseling career. Once they are engrained in their work, its key to make sure they stay adamant about their time and the way it’s spent so that they can show up for others.

With many counselors graduating from Grand Canyon University and being believers, this poses another challenge. People have their own sets of values, morals and beliefs. As part of self-care, prayer and meditation could be vital to the counselor. When it comes to bringing spiritualization into your practice it’s controversial. "Using religion as a therapeutic tool is a little controversial and still emerging," Hathaway says. "Techniques include use of prayer during a session, ways to direct clients to pray, spiritual journaling, forgiveness protocols, using biblical texts to reinforce healthy mental and emotional habits and working to change punitive God images", (Kersting, 2003). Counselors can’t push their religion on to another person and should always be aware of ethical guidelines when they want to treat a client. Although, this may be a great practice to help center people, the counselors must follow protocol when it comes to spirituality and other’s beliefs.

When counselors take time to review the ethical guidelines, they must take time to analyze dispositions as well. Representative dispositional items on the form include the following: 2) Understands, respects, and accommodates for gender, racial, and cultural differences; 3) Understands and maintains professional boundaries with clients; Demonstrates his/her awareness of own limitations of clinical skills and competence; (Miller et al., 2019). Counselors that lean toward making their practice to be spiritual focused must make room for people that don’t identify the way they do. They could have clients that are gay, atheist, and goes completely against their beliefs, but they must accommodate them as well. This could be a challenge if the counselor is apathetic and unwavering to accepting people for who they are. This could very well be a strength for a believer as well to show the love of Christ. This is an opportunity to meet them where they are with no judgement or preconceived notions and give them the help they are looking to get. Another challenge that counselors may face are boundary issues. Boundaries are the blueprint to know someone. It shows them what areas are open, what areas are under construction and what areas are permanently closed. They should be in place for the counselor and the client alike. The strength that this possess is knowing your boundaries and how you want others to show up for you. More than that, it’s how you keep them and maintain them so that they don’t get crossed, broken or ignored. Lastly, the challenge counselors could face is competency. As much as they want to help their clients, there comes a time where they don’t know everything. When they try to speak to a client from their expertise and not from a place of knowing it to be objective, this could harm the client. When you see a counselor that don’t have expertise on a certain topic and they get the continuing education needed to better serve their client population, this shows tremendous strength and will to want to make a difference.

One of the best ways to grow and stay in the know for counselors is to join a professional organization. These organizations are great resources and tools for counselors to stay in the know and to remain competent as they assist others. Some of the benefits that a professional organization offer is legal care with free unlimited telephone consultations with an attorney, journal of professional counseling, Practice, Theory, and Research, industry news and updates, insurance, continuing education and professional development, educational endowment fund grants and a career center, (Texas Counseling Association. 2023). The membership benefits are important for counselors because of the services in which it offers. Counselors should do their due diligence and research what professional organization would best serve them as they continue to grow in their career. Every six years, the American School Counselor Association reviews the Ethical Standards for School Counselors and proposes changes. The previous set of standards was ratified in 2016. At the American School Counselor's Conference in the summer of 2022, the new standards were finalized. School counselors should become familiar with the new guidelines BEFORE beginning the new school year, (Texas Counseling Association. 2023). This is great information to know as counselors continue to study ethical guidelines. They must familiarize themselves with all changes that occur so they can stay compliant.

In conclusion, ethical and legal considerations of the developing counselor encompass a ton of considerations. Having the opportunity to talk through various topics of volunteerism, objectivity, when and when not to self-disclose, are a few among the lists. It’s important for counselors to adhere to ethical guidelines, while keeping boundaries and being uniquely them at the same time. There are tons of resources that are available and readily accessible. As they continue to develop, being inquisitive as a kid while being professional will take them a long way and give them great success in their careers.

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