

Counselor Ethical Boundaries and Practices

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Carrie Lux Cattalo

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The foundational principles of a successful counselor should include maintaining clear boundaries and teaching and exhibiting ethical practices with clients and other professionals. Counselors may observe or encounter unethical boundary issues and problematic dual relationships in their careers, and knowing how to handle these situations is vital. It is also very important for a counselor to remain ethical by working within their scope of practice and working collaboratively with other mental health professionals to ensure clients receive the best care. Ethical relationships with supervisors and colleagues set a level of respect and a precedence a counselor should carry throughout their career. Abiding by the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics will ensure that a counselor sets the standard for all in this profession when ethics are in question.

Boundary Issue and Dual Relationships

A counselor may experience questionable boundary-crossing scenarios and may encounter dual relationship circumstances where ethical issues could arise. The counselor must immediately pause to ensure the safest action plan occurs for anyone involved. Often, intuitions or gut feelings are not enough for a counselor to make that pause, so the ACA Code of Ethics helps to determine criteria. A counselor may feel comfortable with a client, allowing for more open, perhaps friendly, communication. Values or beliefs may be similar, and the relationship may feel more personal. In these cases, a counselor will want to continuously evaluate the professional relationship and therapy sessions to ensure they remain ethically and professionally appropriate. The professional standards and guidelines for counselors are clearly explained in the ACA Code of Ethics. The relationship with a client may reach a point where an invitation is

made to a personal event. A counselor would need to use his or her judgment to determine if it is boundary-crossing or if having this dual relationship aligns with the progress of the therapeutic process. If so, the counselor should fully inform the client of the nature of that relationship, and consent should be given (Hermann & Robinson-Kurpius, 2006).

The ACA Code of Ethics states that sexual and romantic relationships are prohibited, and professional counseling relationships with friends or family members can be dubious as well (Section A5). Suppose a client is sexually suggestive and suddenly deviates from the ordinary session they have had in the past. In that case, the counselor should determine the potential of harm and the best course of action to avoid inflicting harm. If there is any chance of harm, the counselor's actions would be unethical. Imagine if the roles were reversed, and the counselor was being sexually aggressive or suggestive towards the client. The potential for exploitation and harm exists because there is a power differential between the counselor and the client (Herlihy, 2017). The counselor should always rely on the ACA Code of Ethics to uphold all professional standards.

Counselors are supposed to make clients feel safe, and they become trusted confidants. This can create an environment for a client he or she has never had. This safe space may make a client's feelings feel warranted and appreciated. Perhaps these elated feelings cause sexually suggestive or flirtatious client motives. The chances of unethical boundary crossing could occur through therapy sessions, collaborative progress, and mental health support. If a client suggests crossing that client-counselor boundary line for any sexual or non-sexual reason, the counselor must pause to consider ethical boundaries and the harm that could occur with dual relationships, review the code of ethics, an ethical decision-making model and consider seeking advice from colleagues.

Professional Collaboration in Counseling: Working with a Multidisciplinary Team

Clients will receive the best care if mental health professionals in the human service and integrated behavioral health care systems work within their scope of practice and work closely with other professionals when a referral is necessary or when the professionals need additional support. Counselors must be willing to work with a multidisciplinary team to make accurate assessments and ensure the best course of action for each client (Corey, 2019). Working with a multidisciplinary team involves collaboration and consultation with professionals with separate disciplines to solve problems or cases outside each professional's scope of practice. Team members should draw on perspectives and experiences within their field and contribute cooperatively to the well-being of their clients (Okech & Geroski, n.d.). This would require the client's informed consent and involvement, meetings with individuals on the team, and communication on progress and decision-making.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) states that evidence-based programs that have studied the correlation between juvenile delinquency and mental health show that 70% of delinquents have some mental health impairment. When the mental health needs of these juveniles are met, a reduction in criminological activity is presented (*Intersection between Mental Health and the Juvenile Justice System*, 2017). Helping these children to reduce recidivism rates is a prime example of a task for a multidisciplinary team. In addition to counselors and psychiatrists, this team may include professionals within the juvenile justice system, such as caseworkers, social workers, police officers, or other law enforcement.

Suppose a teen is arrested for assault. Law enforcement has seen him before; unfortunately, he may be tried as an adult this time. The system has failed him, he has no parental support, and he has never been seen by a mental health counselor. In lieu of jail time, a judge has agreed he undergo mental health counseling and rehabilitation. This process will require an initial assessment by a licensed mental health counselor, which is an entirely different atmosphere for this young man compared to central booking or a juvenile delinquency center. The police officers and probation officers may have very different approaches based on their education and experience or even their history with this particular deviant. Section D.1.a of the ACA Code of Ethics states that counselors must be respectful and acknowledge the expertise of other professionals. A social worker can ensure that the juvenile's home is safe and that he has adequate resources. The school counselor or professional can report any relevant information regarding behavior, absences, and grades. A compilation of confidential information from this multidisciplinary team can help set this young man up for success, advocate for his right to mental health, and remove obstacles he may be facing to reduce recidivism, ultimately bettering his life and the community as a whole (Section A.7.b).

Relationships with Supervisors and Colleagues

According to the ACA Code of Ethics, Section F, a supervisor has many roles. The responsibilities of a supervisor include maintaining ethical boundaries, making fair assessments, monitoring trainees while providing constructive feedback, and ensuring client welfare, to name a few. Ethical issues can arise while a counselor is under supervision. When faced with an ethical dilemma, the best approach is to complete an ethical decision-making model to weigh all options (Natwick, 2018). Counselors may also be faced with inadequate supervisors or colleagues. The supervisee may feel they do not have support, their hours are not being recorded, or the

supervisor is dishonest. Similarly, it would be unethical for a counselor not to support the client, bill their sessions properly, or go against the ethics code by interjecting values. The supervisor-counselor relationship is much like the counselor-client relationship in that there lies a power differential. The ACA Code of Ethics is especially sensitive to this because more harm could be done when the level of authority varies. The supervisor and supervisee, however, are both aware of the standards they must uphold through ACA Code of Ethics. A client is unaware of this ethical code and a differentiation to the client-counselor relationship.

Unethical behavior can occasionally be seen in their colleagues, and a counselor must consider the best action plan through an ethical decision-making model. A counselor may be competent in general mental health counseling but not in treating addiction and substance abuse. If a colleague was made aware of this and knew the counselor was untrained in that area, yet a referral was not made, it would be unethical for the counselor to resume client therapy. The ACA has a 7-step model to follow when counselors are faced with a dilemma, which includes identifying the problem, applying the ACA Code of Ethics, determining the nature and implications, brainstorming courses of action, consider the consequences of all options, evaluate the selected path, and then implement the course of action (Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016).

Development of my Thinking about Ethics

This course has been eye-opening and has taught me possible ethical issues that can arise during my career as a counselor. The most important development to me has been the ethical implications of imposing values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Although I have always been cognizant of everyone's differences and accepting of those differences, this course has made me even more aware of the need to remain objective and neutral to ensure value imposition does not

occur. I will remain self-aware to ensure I do not influence a client's beliefs or values directly or indirectly.

I have become more self-aware of my values, beliefs, and how my history and experiences have shaped me as an individual. I have experienced loss, love, discrimination, trauma, success, and failures. I have had relationship failures, learned from my mistakes, and allowed myself to be forgiving, empathetic, accepting, and open-minded so that people trust me and feel free to speak openly without judgment when they are in my presence. I understand the life I was born into is vastly different from others. However, this course has taken that concept to another level. For example, treating people how you want to be treated and asking for that in return is a superficial request. Expecting others to react or feel the same as you, and even being unaware of how imposing one's beliefs and values on others could be harmful, is a level of immaturity. Being accepting of people if they treat you differently, love you differently, speak to you differently, and have different values and beliefs is the only way anyone, and counselors, can help clients and others be more self-aware, the best version of themselves, heal through their experiences, and also be accepting of others. In developmental psychology, there are levels of self-awareness. There are levels of self-awareness in adults too. This course helped peel back another layer of the onion.

In conclusion, being self-aware and ethical can help a counselor form the best plan of action to keep everyone involved out of harm in an inappropriate situation. The supervisor-counselor relationship is much like the counselor-client relationship. All parties need to remain professional and ethical. The counselor and a multidisciplinary team can make great strides with clients through ethical collaboration. If those in the mental health profession can uphold their commitment to the code of ethics, practice self-awareness, and maintain professional

relationships with supervisors and colleagues, it will set a high level of respect for those in the mental health career field and a standard a counselor should carry throughout their career.

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