

Ethics in counseling

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Abstract

The American Counseling Association, also known as the ACA, has values that they believe each counselor should hold to help their clients. These are called the code of ethics, which include the following: autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity. This code of ethics is followed by every counselor, so as to help create a positive and healthy relationship with their client. Although these ethics and values are to be followed, many counselors have ethical dilemmas which usually involve their personal beliefs and values on topics such as religion and sexual orientation. Although counselors face these dilemmas from time to time, they can find ways to help the client in a professional way so they do not harm the client in any way.

Ethics in Counseling

Ethics is a common topic that is brought up into the world of psychology. In the past we have had many situations where ethics, or lack thereof, was brought up due to the experiments that had taken place harming the volunteers in one way or another. Overall, ethics are moral principles that an individual or group follows in their day-to-day life. Counselors have their own code of ethics they must follow so they can avoid harming their client and themselves. According to the ACA (2014), these codes of ethics include the following: autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity.

Autonomy according to ACA (2014) is the obligation the counselor has to allow their clients the right to make their own decisions. An example of this is when both the counselor and client create a plan that will help the patient with whatever they are troubled with, with the counselor making sure the patient knows the positives and negatives of each action. Counselors must be cautious not to make their opinion on certain subjects known, such as religion and politics, as they could interfere with the client's viewpoint on making their decision.

Nonmaleficence according to the ACA is to avoid harming clients and/or others at all costs. This harm could be either physical, verbal, discussing their own opinions in session, or not being qualified to treat patient. The counselor should make sure they are qualified to help clients in certain situations, and if they are not, they should help them find someone else who is without any judgement. Counselors should also be aware that being physical with a client, whether that is hugging, patting on the back, and any other suggestive/aggressive motions could harm the patient in not just a physical way, but also an emotional way depending on the situation the client is in.

Beneficence according to the ACA is the obligation to do good for a client and/or society or at least prevent further harm towards them. This could be by promoting mental health or personal well-being. Counselors should create individual plans with their clients to discuss their treatment and make goal plans to help better the patient as well. These plans should be realistic to the client and the counselor should act as a mediator towards the client and their problem, not being too harsh or too nice so the patient can come up with their own decisions.

Justice according to the ACA is the obligation to treat others the way they would like to be treated in certain or similar situations. If a client is going through a hard time, then the counselor should give them extra grace while helping them find ways to cope or solve the issue they are facing. Counselors should also be careful not to be late and try not to cancel appointments, as the clients' time is just as valuable as the counselors.

Finally, the ACA states that fidelity is for counselors to honor what they have promised to do for the client and to keep the commitment of trust in the professional relationship between the two. This could include being present in sessions, protecting the confidentiality of patients, and not entering any inappropriate relationships with their clients. If the counselor breaks confidentiality, they could mess up the reputation of them and the client, as well as get into legal trouble if it goes that far. The counselor should also not counsel clients who they know outside of their job, such as family or friends, as this could lead to bias towards the patient and their treatment.

Although these codes of ethics help counselors maintain a healthy relationship with their clients, there are certain dilemmas that some counselors face. Many counselors can have issues with putting their values onto clients. Brian Zinnbauer and Kenneth Pargament (2000) has shown that when a counselor's values or personal beliefs are communicated to the client, the client is

more likely to adopt those same values. This leads to clouding the client's judgment and their own beliefs and could cause them to make a decision that they are not comfortable making or don't believe is right.

Although counselors have the right to decline services to clients, a few counselors decline the right of service to clients who do not follow the same values as them, such as religion and/or sexual orientation (Francis & Dugger, 2014). Additionally, this is due to the fact they do not feel comfortable doing so or believe that having these clients shows that they agree with their lifestyle or beliefs. Some counselors directly communicate their beliefs or refer the client to another counselor as a way to honor their personal beliefs/values. This could cause harm and does not serve justice to the client, going against the ACA code of ethics.

This is an ethical dilemma that has been around for a long time. It dates back to the 1960s and unfortunately is still a problem. To conquer this dilemma, Francis and Dugger (2014) believe that a non-directive approach towards the situation could help the counselor honor their personal beliefs as well as help the client make their own decisions. An example of this is if a patient who is a homosexual and is facing a problem with their sexuality and asks for advice, the counselor should not put their personal beliefs onto the client but instead acknowledge the problem and let the client know that this is a personal decision that only they could make.

References

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