

Ethical Dilemmas in Counselling

The best way to think about ethical principles is to imagine how you would apply them in real life situations, especially when the right thing to do is not all that clear cut, that is, when the situation poses an ethical dilemma.

Ethical Dilemma 1

You are working as a school counsellor in the local high school. A lawyer calls you asking for information about one of the students on your caseload. She says that the information is important and that the family says it's OK for you to talk to her. What do you do?

Ethical Principle: *keep your information about clients, including records, confidential. This includes information about their identity.*

Clients have a right to privacy in their relationships with you. You are bound by your professional code of ethics to hold confident everything a client tells you this right ensures safety in the relationship and may prevent harm in the clients' encounters in the outside . The right to privacy also includes anonymity – you are bound not to reveal the identities of your clients. You are bound to protect this privacy- including anonymity and confidentiality- in all your discussions with others. You are also ethically required to maintain confidentiality in the ways you maintain records and computer information about clients. Given the ways computers are now used in counselling, including online counselling, new attention needs to be paid to all of the ways confidentiality might be compromised. Do not divulge information about any of your clients without written permission. This may really be a lawyer on the phone, or it may not be a lawyer. It doesn't matter. You do not even reveal that you know the child in question.

There are some notable exceptions when you are required to break the confidential bond. Usually these are to ensure client's (or someone else's)safety or to comply with a court order for release of information. These Special Situations are on the taken with strong supervisory,and perhaps legal, guidance. Depending on where you practice, there may be specific state, agency, or school directives that govern the release of such information. In any case, confidential information would be shared only after obtaining written client consent [Parental are Guardian consent in the case of a minor].

Ethical Dilemma 2

A young woman comes to your office in the local mental health agency. She says she's in counselling with a male counsellor in another agency but that she would really like to work with a woman, and she's heard some very nice things about the way you work. She asks you to take her on as a client. What do you do?

Ethical Principle: *if a person is already in a counselling relationship, do not engage that person in counselling without consent from the other counsellor.*

It makes common sense not to infringe on the professional relationship one of your colleagues may have with any given client. There may be times when it is appropriate for two counsellors to work with a given person –for instance if they are working with distinctly separate issues- but each should be aware of the other's work and should occasionally consult with each other if the client gives permission. Sometimes, a client will intentionally keep secret the fact that he is seeing multiple counsellors. This inevitably makes for an interesting set of dynamics when the truth finally comes out- and it usually does. As long as the counsellors remain unaware of the client's, no ethical standards are being broken. But once they find out, they are ethically bound to deal with the situation, most likely by having one counsellor exit the scene.

Ethical Dilemma 3

You run a group in your school for young parents. One of the participants, a Teen Mom, says that she's been having trouble with anger and that she has shaken her baby a few times recently to stop it from crying. What do you do?

Ethical Principle: *inform authorities if there is a possibility of imminent danger to the client or others.*

You are ethically bound to protect the physical safety of your clients and those who might be harmed by your client, and you must report suspected abuse to the proper authorities. When you have a client who is out of control and is a danger to herself or someone else, you need to be prepared to step in and take action. It is not your job to become a detective, sleuthing out the truth of reported abuse. That is the job of those to whom you report the abuse. Counsellors need to familiarize themselves with their school or agency protocols for

reporting suspected abuse and threats of violence. You do what you can, even in this emotionally charged time, to do what you can to preserve the therapeutic relationship, even in the midst of reporting- Perhaps, if at all feasible, in a way that has your client participating in the reporting process.

This is, yet again, a time when supervision is indicated. It is always a good idea to consult with a supervisor regarding these kinds of questions. This serves two purposes: to help make a truly informed best decision about the matter at hand and to protect yourself in the case of a bad event happening. Should one of your clients attempt to hurt himself or someone else, you will be less likely to be blamed for something not done if you had consulted with others about the situation beforehand. When decisions are shared with superiors, there is always less individual culpability. The supervisor or director of an agency may even be held legally responsible for the agency counsellors' work.

Ethical Dilemma 4

One of your clients, an attractive person about your age, suggests going out for coffee some afternoon next week. What do you do?

Ethical Principle: *avoid all other kinds of relationships with clients, particularly those of an intimate, sexual nature.*

This seems to be an obvious and easily followed sanction on its face, yet it is too often violated. Unwary or manipulative counsellors can become entangled unnecessarily in complicated dual relationships with clients. These "entanglements" may have financial, sexual, or a simple friendship qualities that seriously jeopardize the primary professional counselling relationship. Whenever I do all relationship is allowed to develop, conflict of interest issues inevitably emerge. When you become involved with someone as a client, this is the only kind of relationship you should maintain with the client.

You should also come up for similar reasons, not engage in a counselling relationship with your family members, friends, or people with whom you have other kinds of previous relationships- those, too, would have qualities of the dual relationship.

Discussion continues in the field about the appropriateness of pursuing other kinds of relationships with clients, or with students who have terminated or graduated. The ACA

ethical guidelines suggest that a minimum of two year after termination should pass before entering into any other kind of relationship and, only then, when there is no possibility for exploitation. The APA is hesitant to attach that timeframe to its discussion of this kind of relationship expansion, but it is clear in its sanctions against entering blithely into them.

You will perhaps even routinely, have strong affectionate, even erotic, feelings for some of your clients. That is a wonderful aspect of this work, having to do the deep emotional bond that forms between us and the people with whom we work. These feelings have a tremendous potential to help or harm. If used in the best service of your clients or students, it can have great reparative powers. If used for your own gain, no matter how cleverly you rationalize otherwise, it is only destructive. The feelings of love, even the erotic ones, are tender indicators of your respect and affection for the person in your care. Some of these feelings may have to do directly with your client; others may be related more to your own past relationships or unmet love needs. This is the business of countertransference. How you manage those feelings, as well as how you choose to act with them, makes all the difference. This business of managing your own feelings, coming to grips with the countertransference, is a primary reason to have a good supervisor.

Finally, be aware that we are protectors of the profession when it comes to the question of unethical dual relationships. When you hear from clients or colleagues of unethical behaviour on the part of some colleague, you are duty bound to assume responsibility for dealing with that misbehaviour. This will involve your own application of ACA Ethical principles to the offending behaviour and consultation with objective colleagues and the appropriate licensing board, assuming the individual is licensed. Failing to do so might jeopardize not only that professional's current and future but also your professional standing. You are liable, like it or not, for your colleagues' misbehaviour.