

Keynote Address for the American Counseling Association Pittsburgh Conference

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Keynote Topic: The Counselor as a Person and as a Professional

Who we are as a person and as a professional are integrally related. This talk focuses on some of the ways our personal life impacts our professional life and how our professional work affects us personally. Some of the topics to be addressed are: the counselor as a therapeutic person; personal therapy for therapists; addressing ethical issues; managing personal and professional boundaries; how our values and beliefs affect what we do professionally; personal issues that many counselors face; effectively managing the stress associated with being a counselor; the challenge of balancing life roles; the necessity of maintaining our vitality; and the importance of self-care.

Introduction

As counselors we ask clients to look honestly at themselves and to choose how they want to change. It is essential that we are open to the same kind of reflection on our part. There is considerable research literature that indicates that who the counselor is as a person is the most critical determinant of therapeutic outcomes, and that the quality of the client/counselor relationship is at least as important as the counselor's theory or techniques. The human dimension is what most counts when it comes to counseling that produces results.

Personal Characteristics of Effective Counselors

Effective counselors have some or many of the following traits that enable them to establish and maintain a good working relationship with their clients. A few traits of an "ideal helper" include:

- Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses
- Having a curiosity and openness to learning
- Interpersonal skills you can use in counseling
- Genuine caring and compassion
- Showing respect for people who differ from you
- Taking care of yourself
- A healthy sense of self-love and pride
- Think of traits that you deem most essential.

Some Concerns and Challenges Faced by Counselors

- Dealing with our anxieties
- Being ourselves and disclosing ourselves
- Avoiding perfectionism
- Dealing with clients to test our patients
- Dealing with clients who lack commitment
- Tolerating ambiguity
- Avoiding losing ourselves in our clients
- Establishing appropriate personal and professional boundaries
- Developing a sense of humor
- Sharing responsibility with the client
- Developing collaborative relationships with clients
- Declining to give advice
- Defining your role as a counselor
- Developing your own counseling style
- Staying vital as a person and as a professional

How Your Theory Influences Your Counseling Practice

It is important to eventually develop a style of counseling practice that reflects your uniqueness as a person. Your theory of counseling needs to be congruent with what complements you personally. Many counselors acknowledge the limitations of basing their practice on a single theoretical system and are open to the value of integrating various therapeutic approaches or drawing on a diverse range of techniques. Those clinicians who are open to an integrative perspective may find that several theories play crucial roles in their personal approach. Each theory has its unique contributions and its own domain of expertise. By accepting that each theory has strengths and weaknesses and is, by definition, different from the others, practitioners have some basis to begin developing a counseling model that fits them.

It is important to be open to the value inherent in each of the theories of counseling. All the theories have some unique contributions as well as some limitations. It is probably useful to study all the contemporary theories to determine which concepts and techniques you can incorporate into your approach to practice. Because there is no “correct” theoretical approach, it is well for you to search for an approach that fits who you are and to think in terms of working toward an integrated approach that addresses thinking, feeling, and behaving. This kind of integration implies that you have a basic knowledge of various theoretical systems and counseling techniques as a basis for working effectively with diverse client populations in various settings. Functioning exclusively within the parameters of one theory may not provide you with the therapeutic flexibility that you need to deal creatively with the complexities associated with diverse client populations.

For those of you who are beginning your counseling career, it is probably wise to select the primary theory closest to your basic beliefs. Learn a theory as thoroughly as you can, and at the same time be open to examining other theories in depth. If you begin by working within the parameters of a favored theory, you will have an anchor point from which to construct your own counseling perspective. But do not think that simply because you adhere to one theory you can use the same techniques with all of your clients. Even if you adhere to a single theory, you will need to be flexible in the manner in which you apply the techniques that flow from this theory as you work with different clients.

If you are currently a student in training, it is unrealistic to expect that you will already have an integrated and well-defined theoretical model. An integrative perspective is the product of a great deal of reading, study, supervision, clinical practice, research, and theorizing. With time and reflective study, the goal is to develop a consistent conceptual framework that you can use as a basis for selecting from the multiple techniques that you will eventually be exposed to. Developing your personalized approach that guides your practice is a lifelong endeavor that is refined with experience.

The Counselor as an Ethical Person

Awareness of ethics is central to effective practice in counseling. Being an ethical practitioner is not merely a way to avoid a malpractice suit, but it is a route to counseling that makes a life-changing difference. Ethics is not a matter of simple solutions to the dilemmas we will face, for many of the dilemmas are very complex and could have several ethical solutions. There is no one correct ethical path. This implies that practitioners need to create their own perspective on working ethically.

Ethical practice involves far more than merely knowing and following a professional code of ethics. Codes of ethics provide general standards, but these are not sufficiently explicit to deal with every situation. It is often difficult to interpret ethics codes, and opinions differ over how to apply them in specific cases. Consequently, we will encounter many situations that demand the exercise of sound judgment to further the best interests of our clients.

In dealing with ethical dilemmas, we will rarely find clear-cut answers. Most of the problems are complex and defy simple solution. Making ethical decisions involves acquiring a tolerance for dealing with gray areas and for coping with ambiguity. Although knowing the ethical standards is essential, this knowledge alone is not sufficient. Ethics codes are not dogmatic, however, they do provide guidance in assisting us in making the best possible decisions for the benefit of our clients.

It is clear that ethics codes are not intended to be blueprints that remove all need for judgment and ethical reasoning. Formal ethical principles can never be substituted for an active, deliberative, and creative approach to meeting ethical responsibilities. Ethics codes cannot be applied in a rote manner, mainly because each client's situation is unique and calls for a different solution.

Even if we resolve some of these issues at the initial stage of our development as a counselor, these topics are likely to take on new dimensions as we gain experience. The

definition and refinement of ethical concerns is an evolutionary process that requires an open and self-critical attitude. It is good for each of us to formulate an ethical decision making model that we can apply when we deal with an ethical dilemma. Being willing to consult is a sign of professionalism, and regular consultation with colleagues and supervisors is essential.

Ethical Issues from a Diversity Perspective

Mental health professionals have been urged to learn about their own culture and to become aware of how their experiences affect the way they work with those who are culturally different. By being ignorant of the values and attitudes of a diverse range of clients, counselors open themselves to criticism and ineffectiveness. We are all culture-bound to some extent, and it takes a concerted effort to monitor our positive and negative biases so that they do not impede the formation of counseling relationships. We can increase our cultural awareness by direct contact with a variety of groups, by reading, by special course work, by consultation and discussions with colleagues, and by in-service professional workshops.

One of the major challenges facing mental health professionals is understanding the complex role cultural diversity and similarity plays in their work. All counseling interventions are multicultural. Clients and counselors bring a great variety of attitudes, values, culturally learned assumptions, biases, beliefs, and behaviors to the therapeutic relationship. From an ethical perspective, it is essential that our practices be accurate, appropriate, and meaningful for the clients with whom we work. This entails rethinking our theories and modifying our techniques to meet clients' unique needs and not rigidly applying interventions in the same manner to all clients. Working effectively with cultural diversity in the therapeutic process is a requirement of good ethical practice.

Cultural sensitivity is not limited to one group but applies to all cultures. There is no sanctuary from cultural bias. All mental health practitioners must avoid using their own group as the standard by which to assess appropriate behavior in others. In addition, greater differences may exist within the same cultural group than between different cultural groups, and we need to be intraculturally sensitive as well as multiculturally sensitive.

Managing Personal and Professional Boundaries

If we have difficulty in establishing and maintaining boundaries in our personal life, the chances are that we will have difficulty when it comes to managing boundaries in our professional work. Professional boundaries are involved in terms of dealing effectively with multiple relationships. Nonsexual dual and multiple relationships, sometimes referred to as *nonprofessional relationships*, came under increased scrutiny in the 1990s, but little consensus has been reached with regard to a determination of ethical practice. Examples of nonsexual multiple relationships include accepting clients who are family members or friends, combining the roles of supervisor and therapist, forming business arrangements with therapy clients, or combining personal counseling with consultation or supervision. Nonsexual multiple relationships are generally discouraged, however, and

counselors are cautioned about the dangers of exploitation of and harm to clients.

Nonprofessional relationships tend to be complex, and few of the questions surrounding them have simple and absolute answers. Counselors cannot always perform a single role when working with clients or in the community, nor is it always desirable that they limit themselves to one role. Many times, counselors will be challenged to balance multiple roles in their professional relationships. Counselors need to take steps to safeguard clients by making use of informed consent, consultation, supervision, and documentation.

Some behaviors counselors may engage in have a potential for creating a dual or multiple relationship, but they are not, by themselves, dual or multiple relationships. For example, neither bartering for services nor accepting small gifts from clients necessarily involve dual relationships, but both can be potentially problematic.

There is a difference between crossing boundaries and violating boundaries. A *boundary crossing* is a departure from standard practice that could potentially benefit clients, whereas a *boundary violation* is a serious breach that causes harm to the client. Interpersonal boundaries are fluid; they may change over time and may be redefined as counselors and clients continue to work together. Even though boundary crossings may not be harmful to clients, these crossings can lead to blurring of professional roles and can result in problems for both the client and the counselor. It is critical to take steps to prevent boundary crossings from becoming boundary violations.

The controversy surrounding nonprofessional relationships is likely to continue. As with any complex ethical issue, complete agreement may not be reached. Prohibiting all forms of multiple relationships does not seem to be the best answer to the problem of exploitation of clients.

Values and the Counseling Process

It is neither possible nor desirable for counselors to be completely neutral with respect to values. Although it is not the counselor's function to persuade clients to accept a certain value system, it is crucial for counselors to be clear about their own values and how they influence their work with clients, perhaps even unconsciously. No approach to therapy is value free. You have an ethical responsibility to be aware of how your beliefs and core values affect your work and you need to take care to avoid unduly influencing your clients. You might consider for a moment some of your core values and how these values influence your professional work.

Clinicians may not agree with the values of their clients, but it is essential that they respect the rights of their clients to hold a different set of values. The way therapists deal with clients' values can raise ethical issues.

Most practitioners work with diverse client populations and it is essential for them to understand and respect their worldviews. As counselors, we need to know about our own culture as a framework to understand those who differ from us. Our task is to do our best to accurately and sensitively understand and appreciate the many ways clients may have different values and perspectives than we do as counselors.

Your value system influences every facet of your counseling practice, including your assessment strategies, your views of goals of treatment, the interventions used, the

topics explored during the sessions, and evaluations of therapy outcomes.

Value Conflicts: To Refer or Not to Refer

Some counselors believe they can work with any client or problem. They may be convinced that being professional means being able to assist everyone. Others are so unsure of their abilities that they are quick to refer anyone who makes them feel uncomfortable. Somewhere between these extremes are the cases in which your values and those of your client clash to such an extent that you question your ability to be helpful. A few areas where counselors might struggle with values conflicts are matters pertaining to: end-of-life decisions, family values, gender-role identity, cultural values, abortion, sexual orientation, and the role of spirituality and religion in counseling.

The challenge for counselors is to recognize when their values clash with a client's values to the extent that they are not able to function effectively. Merely having a conflict of values does not necessarily require a referral; it is possible to work through such conflicts successfully. In fact, it is best to think of a referral as the last resort.

When a referral is decided upon, *how* it is done is critical. Make it clear to the client that it is *your* problem and not the client's. It can be very burdensome to clients to be saddled with your disclosure of not being able to get beyond value differences.

Before making a referral, explore your part of the difficulty through consultation. What barriers within you would prevent you from working with a client who has a different value system? Merely disagreeing with a client or not particularly liking what a client is proposing to do is not ethical grounds for a referral. When you recognize instances of such value conflicts, ask yourself this question: "Why is it necessary that there be congruence between my value system and that of my client?" It is good for us to keep in mind that *it is not about us*, but about our clients!

Spirituality is both an existential and multicultural issue. Because spiritual and religious values play a major part in human life and in an individual's search for meaning, clients' spiritual values should be viewed as a potential resource in therapy, rather than something to be ignored. Spirituality is an aspect of diversity that often needs to be addressed in counseling. Although it is important to be open to dealing with spiritual and religious and spiritual themes in counseling, counselors should be cautious about introducing these themes and be aware of the potential for countertransference. Some counselors may push their spiritual or religious beliefs, and others may impose their nonreligious or antireligious attitudes. Counselors have a responsibility for carefully monitoring themselves so that they will not impose their values pertaining to spirituality and religion on clients. Likewise, this same monitoring applies to therapists who exclude spiritual and religious issues from therapy, for they are also in danger of imposing their values on clients. Therapists must guard against making decisions for their clients.

Personal Therapy for Counselors

Without a high level of self-awareness, mental health professionals are likely to obstruct the progress of their clients as the focus of counseling shifts from meeting the client's

needs to meeting the needs of the therapist. Practitioners must be aware of their own needs, areas of “unfinished business,” personal conflicts, defenses, and vulnerabilities and how these can interfere in their professional work. Personal therapy may reduce the intensity connected with these problems, but it is probably a misconception to believe that such problems are ever fully resolved. Clearly, then, there is not the implication that counselors should have resolved all their personal difficulties before they begin to counsel others.

The critical point is not *whether* you happen to be struggling with personal problems, but *how* you are struggling with them, and what you are willing to do to deal with your problems.

Personal therapy during training and throughout therapists’ professional careers can enhance the counselor’s ability to focus on the needs and welfare of their clients. Therapists cannot take clients any further than they have taken themselves; therefore ongoing self-exploration is important.

By focusing on your own personal development, you will be better equipped to deal with the range of transference reactions your clients are bound to have toward you. The therapeutic relationship can intensify the reactions of both client and therapist, and how practitioners handle both their own feelings and their clients’ feelings will have a direct bearing on therapeutic outcomes. If these issues are not attended to, clients’ progress will most likely be impeded, and this is an ethical issue.

You will also be better able to detect potential countertransference on your part and have a basis for dealing with such reactions in a therapeutic manner. There is a potential for unethical behavior in mismanaging countertransference, and you may find that you need to review your personal concerns periodically throughout your career. This honest self-appraisal is an essential quality of effective helpers.

Experienced counselors can profit from a program that will challenge them to reexamine their beliefs and behaviors, especially as these pertain to their effectiveness in working with clients. Committed professionals engage in a lifelong self-examination as a means of remaining self-aware and genuine.

There is a good deal of stress that goes along with being a counseling professional. We need to be vigilant in identifying the sources of stress and in learning to effectively manage this stress. Personal therapy can be useful in coping with stress.

Dealing with Stress and Distress

Many of the stressful client behaviors we discuss in this section could easily be understood as countertransference issues of the therapist. When therapists assume full responsibility for their clients’ lack of progress, they are not helping clients to be responsible for their own therapy.

Practitioners who have a tendency to readily accept full responsibility for their clients often experience their clients’ stress as their own. It is important to recognize signs of when this is happening.

Stress is an event or a series of events that leads to strain, which often results in physical and psychological health problems. Although it is not realistic to expect to eliminate the strains of daily life, you can develop practical strategies to recognize and

cope with stress that is having adverse effects on you.

If you are responsible for contributing to your physical and emotional exhaustion, you can also take action to change this condition. Become attuned to the danger signals that you are being depleted, and take seriously your own need for nurturing and for recognition.

Take a moment to reflect on what are some of the main stressors in your life. Consider how your beliefs and self-talk influence the stress you experience.

Preventing Counselor Burnout and Impairment

Unmanaged stress is a major cause of burnout and eventual impairment. **Burnout** is a state of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual exhaustion characterized by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Impairment is the presence of an illness or severe psychological depletion that is likely to prevent a professional from being able to deliver effective services and results in consistently functioning below acceptable practice standards. Those therapists whose inner conflicts are consistently activated by client material may respond by distancing themselves rather than facilitating the growth of their clients.

Maintaining Vitality: Importance of Self-Care

Sustaining the personal self is a serious ethical obligation. Earlier mention was made of personal therapy as an important form of self-care, but there are multiple avenues for taking care of ourselves. Ongoing attention to self-care is essential for preventing burnout and for maintaining one's level of psychological wellness. The pursuit of psychological wellness through regular self-care practices is an ethical imperative.

Some counselors say that they do not have time to take care of themselves. Can they afford not to take care of themselves? Self-care needs to be made a priority. If we do not take care of ourselves personally, we will not be able to function effectively as professionals. You cannot provide nourishment to your clients if you don't nourish yourself.

Self-care involves searching for positive life experiences that lead to zest, peace, excitement, and happiness. The demands of professional work cannot be met if practitioners are not engaged in self-care. Self-care is best viewed as an ongoing preventive activity for all mental health practitioners.

The topic of self-care for mental health professionals is receiving increased attention. In *Caring for Ourselves: A Therapist's Guide to Personal and Professional Well-Being*, Baker (2003) emphasizes the importance of tending to mind, body, and spirit. This involves learning to pay attention to and be respectful of our needs, which is a lifelong task for therapists. Baker makes the point that for us to have enough to share with others in our personal and professional lives, we need to nourish ourselves. It will be difficult to maintain our vitality if we do not find ways to consistently tend to our whole being. Although as helping professionals we often have knowledge about self-care, the critical question is whether we actually apply what we know to our daily lives.

Another significant book is *In Leaving it at the Office: A Guide to Psychotherapist Self-Care*, Norcross and Guy (2007). Their book deals with the importance of self-monitoring and developing strategies and action plans to ensure that we take care of ourselves both personally and professionally. Once you make a comprehensive self-assessment of how well you are taking care of yourself in specific areas, this can provide you with direction for deciding what aspects of your life you may want to change.

It is essential to create an action plan and make a commitment to carry out this plan. What are some steps you can begin taking now to take better care of yourself?

Develop your own strategy for keeping yourself alive personally and professionally.

Here are some thoughts:

- Examine your behavior to determine if it is working for you.
- Look at your expectations to determine whether they are realistic.
- Recognize that you can be an active agent in your life. Find other sources of meaning besides your work.
- It is easy to become overwhelmed by thinking about all the things that you feel powerless to change. Instead, focus on the aspects of your work that you have the power to change.
- Learn your own limits and strive to avoid overextending yourself. Others might not make this easy, so it will take considerable self-discipline to maintain your limits.
- Look to colleagues and friends. Don't try to internalize all of your concerns and deal with them alone.
- Create a support group. If you wait for the system to organize a formal support group for you and your co-workers, you may have a long and frustrating wait.

The real challenge is to learn ways to structure your life so that you can prevent burnout. Prevention is much easier than trying to cure a condition of severe physical and psychological depletion.

Counseling can be a rewarding profession that allows us to make a significant difference in the lives of others. This is a great opportunity for us to find meaning in life and at the same time to help make the world a better place.

Reflection: Imagine you will be here one year from today – What would you MOST want to say that you have changed in your life?

Suggested Readings

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