



Handling conflicts of personal values

Question: I have a client who wants to discuss and work on an issue that is against my personal belief system. I know the *ACA Code of Ethics* states that I cannot impose my personal values on my client. However, speaking on matters that I strongly disagree with will cause me distress. Therefore, I do not feel that I will be beneficial to the client. What are my rights as a counselor for my own mental health?

Answer: Professional counselors are individuals who help clients through difficult times and to process the complexities of life. The primary responsibility of a counselor is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of clients. In addition, to be considered a competent counselor, one must be culturally sensitive and respectful of the diversity that clients bring into the therapeutic relationship. Standard A.4.b. in the *ACA Code of Ethics* does state that counselors avoid imposing “their own values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors” and “seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor’s values are inconsistent with the client’s goals or are discriminatory in nature.” Quite simply, the client’s goals are the focus of the counseling process.

Counseling is not an easy career, nor is it one in which learning and self-growth ever stop. If a counselor’s interaction with a client is affecting the counselor on a level that could have an impact on the counselor’s professional judgment, then the counselor has a professional responsibility to seek training, supervision or personal counseling. Standard C.2.g. explains the responsibility that counselors have in monitoring themselves and other counselors for signs of impairment. When a counselor’s personal concerns become

influential in the therapeutic relationship, the clients are the ones who suffer.

The professional values stated within the *ACA Code of Ethics* are:

- **Autonomy:** Fostering the right to control the direction of one’s life
- **Nonmaleficence:** Avoiding actions that cause harm
- **Beneficence:** Working for the good of the individual and society by promoting mental health and well-being
- **Justice:** Treating individuals equitably and fostering fairness and equality
- **Fidelity:** Honoring commitments and keeping promises, including fulfilling one’s responsibilities of trust in professional relationships
- **Veracity:** Dealing truthfully with individuals with whom counselors come into professional contact

When a counselor allows his or her personal values to muddle the interaction with the client, the client’s autonomy is threatened. The counselor can cause harm to the client by devaluing the client’s personal beliefs and values. A counselor is not working for the good of the individual if the counselor sits in judgment of the client. Justice is not served when conflicts concerning personal values cause a counselor to treat one client differently than another client who has the same presenting issues. A counselor does not honor professional commitments or the profession in general if the counselor puts self before the client. Finally, a counselor must be truthful to self and recognize personal triggers and signs that the client is no longer the main focus.

Counselors are helping professionals. *Helping* meaning we use our skills to aid others and *professionals* meaning we are respectful of others. This is not a

profession in which our personal selves should be the focus. If that happens, then we have lost our professional identity.

The American Counseling Association is not asking anyone to change their personal beliefs. Counselors will always have clients with whom they disagree for one reason or another and, therefore, these clients may cause distress to the counselor. When in distress or facing conflict between personal and professional values, seek help and training from other professionals. As professionals, we should support each other in establishing a strong, accepting professional identity. Finally, we should be willing to be challenged outside of our comfort zones by clients because challenges cause personal growth for us as counselors.



The questions addressed in this column are submitted by ACA members for educational purposes. Submit questions or comments to mwade@counseling.org with the subject line “Ethics Column.” As a reminder, a benefit of ACA membership is personal ethical consultations through the ACA Ethics Department at 800.347.6647 ext. 314 or ethics@counseling.org. ♦

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