



## #MeToo: The ethics of counselor self-disclosure

**N**ews stories about accusations of sexual misconduct in the workplace by well-known or powerful people have been on the rise in recent months. These allegations have sparked both online and offline discussions about the prevalence of this behavior and its effects on victims, characterized by the many thousands who have shared their stories via the hashtag #MeToo.

Why have so many chosen to share their stories online? The reasons are many, but they include a desire to empower and support other victims and to raise awareness among the general public. Counselors are watching with interest because these issues are relevant to their work with clients. In the end, however, social media is not the same as a counseling relationship. Therefore, counselors should be thoughtful in how they let movements such as #MeToo affect their work with clients.

As the national conversation surrounding sexual misconduct in the workplace continues, counselors and their clients may find that the topic makes its way into counseling sessions in a wide variety of settings, from clinical mental health to school counseling and career counseling. Based on recent disclosures, it seems likely that many counselors and their clients may have experienced some type of sexual misconduct in the workplace.

Counselors may discover that these news stories bring up reactions in them and in their clients. Some counselors may even consider sharing their own #MeToo stories. The 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* gives guidance about ethical issues that counselors must examine before engaging in self-disclosure, whether in person or online. When it comes to self-disclosure, the most crucial considerations are the risks and benefits to the client. This applies

to counselor self-disclosure on any topic and in any counseling setting.

### Reasons for self-disclosure

When hearing clients' stories of sexual misconduct in the workplace, counselors may have their #MeToo moment and wonder if they should share their own comparable experiences. Before doing so, they need to consider the reasons for engaging in self-disclosure.

One counselor interviewed for this column described the reasons she might consider using self-disclosure as "emphasizing that counseling is a safe space to explore difficult and complex experiences and navigate the associated feelings, thereby supporting the client by reinforcing strengths, building resilience and hope by modeling personal behaviors, and exploring workable solutions and paths toward healing."

Self-disclosure can help in building rapport, which is essential to the counseling relationship. Counselors often choose to disclose about themselves and their lives to aid in the development of trust that is necessary for counseling to be effective. Many clients feel uneasy telling a stranger about their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Getting to know their counselor better on a personal level can help ease this feeling.

Sometimes, clients might think that they are alone in their struggles. This could be particularly likely if their concerns about sexual misconduct have been ignored at work, as one counselor described having happened to one of her clients. For that reason, some clients find it very helpful when counselors share that they have had a similar experience. Self-disclosure can be used to express empathy and to help these clients feel that their emotions and experiences are being validated.

Counseling relationships are one-sided by design. That is, the focus is always supposed to be on the client, not the counselor. Even so, this imbalance can make some clients uncomfortable, and they may ask their counselors to share about themselves. It should not become routine for the client and counselor to take turns sharing, however. The counselor's focus should remain on the client, with the counselor sharing sparingly.

Counselors should also be working to reduce stigma and give clients hope. "Counselors play a key role in facilitating and exploring the client's voice, which may include using a therapeutic technique such as counselor self-disclosure," said one counselor. "I think it is important to acknowledge that in our society, discussions of sexual misconduct in the workplace have typically flown under the radar. They are seen as taboo and are often settled out of court, where, due to nondisclosure agreements, the victims and the alleged perpetrators are silenced." In counseling, however, this topic is not taboo; it can be discussed safely.

### Risks of self-disclosure

One of the most significant risks of counselor self-disclosure is a shift in focus away from the client's needs and treatment goals. One of the counselors interviewed for this article described other ways that self-disclosure could have a negative impact. "A client may view the [counselor] self-disclosure as self-serving and as evidence of impairment," she said. "The client might view it as incompetence or unethical conduct. Self-disclosure has the potential to cause a rupture of the therapeutic alliance or unwittingly create boundary issues if a counselor discloses too much information to the client." This counselor warns that any of these

scenarios could result in a grievance being filed against the counselor.

Counselor and client characteristics are also essential considerations in self-disclosure. One counselor described the risks he sees with using self-disclosure. “Although I have experienced sexual misconduct in the workplace, I do not find it appropriate to self-disclose because I identify as male,” the counselor said. “In my experience, all of my clients who report sexual misconduct in the workplace identify as female. They report that their male colleagues are the ones who facilitate the sexual misconduct in the workplace. Because of the gender differences, our experiences, more than likely, are not comparable.”

Other risks revolve around the client’s personality and presenting issues. For example, if a counselor shares his or her struggles, a client who has difficulty with worry or excessive caretaking might be triggered to engage in behavior detrimental to the counseling process. In addition, counselors should not share their own experiences of sexual misconduct in the workplace if they have not thoroughly processed these events and their reactions to them. Self-disclosure should not occur if it jeopardizes the quality of care to clients.

With a social-media-based movement such as #MeToo, counselors must weigh the risks and benefits to their clients before sharing their personal experiences regarding sexual misconduct in the workplace in a public online setting. Counselors should be aware that the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* requires that personal and professional social media profiles be kept separate. If counselors are using social media channels only for personal (rather than professional) purposes, they should ensure that they are competent in the use of privacy settings so they can avoid any accidental disclosures to those outside of their virtual connections — specifically, clients.

If counselors are using social media for professional purposes, they should consider whether self-disclosure on these platforms could potentially be harmful to their clients. There is no way to predict how seeing a counselor’s disclosure online will affect a client. Because online disclosure happens outside of session, there may not be an opportunity for

counselors and clients to process this together to ensure that clients are not harmed. This makes online disclosure even more questionable.

### Considerations for ethical self-disclosure

No matter what the dilemma, one ethical standard always rings true: Put the client first. The same holds true for counselor self-disclosure. One counselor interviewed for this column suggested that all counselors should ask themselves the following questions before sharing about themselves or their experiences: “Will this client benefit from hearing this personal information now? Am I self-disclosing based on my own emotional needs? Are any boundaries being crossed, and is there a potential or actual conflict of interest? Do I need to seek consultation or supervision? Moreover, am I familiar with ACA ethical guidelines that govern self-disclosure?”

Regarding his work with victims of sexual misconduct in the workplace, one counselor said, “Instead [of using self-disclosure], I focus on being present with the clients and supporting them during their time with me. . . . I allow them to go as far as they are willing because I recognize that I am male, and the clients may not feel safe to explain what happened to them. I normalize the stressful and emotional reactions they have. As we discuss what happened and how they want to move forward, we collaborate on what they need at the moment, such as support resources, action plans or a listening ear.”

Self-disclosure should be thought of as a precise instrument to engage clients and help move them toward their treatment goals rather than a blanket policy of “disclose or not disclose,” even if the issue at hand is timely or significant for the counselor.

### Conclusion

Emotionally charged topics in the news such as the #MeToo movement might make some counselors consider self-disclosing. Before doing so, however, they should always weigh the risks and benefits. Counselors must put their clients first. Before sharing a personal experience, counselors should ask whether that action will serve their clients and their progress toward their treatment goals.

Self-disclosure is helpful when it strengthens the counseling relationship by building trust, expressing empathy and making a client “feel heard.” Self-disclosure is detrimental when it changes or shifts the focus of the counseling relationship, is not relevant or triggers a problematic behavior in the client. Counselors need to know the difference.

For further information, consult the following standards in the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*:

- ❖ A.1.a. Primary Responsibility
- ❖ A.4.a. Avoiding Harm
- ❖ A.4.b. Personal Values
- ❖ A.6.b. Extending Counseling Boundaries
- ❖ A.6.c. Documenting Boundary Extensions
- ❖ A.7.a. Advocacy
- ❖ B.7. Case Consultation
- ❖ C.2.g. Impairment
- ❖ C.6. Public Responsibility
- ❖ C.6.a. Sexual Harassment
- ❖ H.6. Social Media
- ❖ I.1.b. Ethical Decision Making



Want more? Check out these resources:

- ❖ *Boundary Issues in Counseling: Multiple Roles and Responsibilities*, third edition, by Barbara Herlihy and Gerald Corey, 2015, American Counseling Association
- ❖ *Relationships in Counseling and the Counselor’s Life* by Jeffrey A. Kottler and Richard S. Balkin, 2017, American Counseling Association
- ❖ Report of the Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace, 2016: [eeoc.gov/eeoc/task\\_force/harassment/upload/report.pdf](http://eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/upload/report.pdf) ❖

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