The Epitome of Counseling Ethics

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What does an ethical counselor believe, say, and do? Are Dr. Smith’s therapeutic techniques right or wrong? Is the confidentiality dilemma with a potentially suicidal client cut and dry? The aforementioned questions and examples of dichotomous thinking produce no clear answers concerning general ethics and ethical dilemmas. Ethical dilemmas are recognized by practitioners as inherent in the provision of mental health services because of work with such dynamic, complex, and ever-changing clients (Cottone & Claus, 2000). Consequently the American Counseling Association’s (ACA) current *Code of Ethics*, adopted in 2005, outlines minimal ethical standards and guidelines for the profession. One could easily describe an ethical counselor as one who abides by the ACA *Code of Ethics* (2005), since codes of ethics are often viewed as prominent hallmarks of a profession (Vilia, Michael, & Jodi, 2004). Herein the question lies; what distinguishes a counselor who adheres to an agreed-upon protocol from a counselor who epitomizes aspirational ethics, or the highest standards of conduct?

It is asserted that the most favorable ethical posture for counselors to possess comes from within and decisions based on personal conscience (May, 1992). Moreover, it is not unreasonable to define the description of an ethical counselor as possessing solid values like beneficence and fairness. Values separate themselves from ethics in the sense that values predict the motivation and mechanisms of therapy, whereas ethics define the framework of professional therapy. Values can be viewed as a model of a home, while ethics exists as the foundation. Therefore, if a counselor follows the framework, i.e. the ACA *Code of Ethics* (2005) and possesses the foundation, one must consider the distinguishing values of an ethical counselor.

Respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity are six principle characteristics often discussed in professional counseling literature (Remley & Herlihy, 2001). One value not identified as necessary for an ethical counselor, but perhaps the
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The most vital one to demonstrate is courage. Just as living involves taking risks, counseling also requires risks; hence the need for courage. To elaborate, the counselor may choose an intervention that proves ineffective or mistakenly reverses gains made in therapy. Perhaps the most risky of situations concerns counselors accurately screening for suicidal clients and determining the necessary level of care. Therefore, ethical counselors need to constantly question what risks they are willing to take, what permission they give themselves and the client, and determine what protection is needed for themselves, the client, and the community (Monin, 2011).

The courage of a counselor to practice and live by personal and professional ethical convictions is worthy of admiration. A therapist who adheres not only to ethical guidelines and possesses values previously mentioned, but acts, thinks, and behaves in a manner congruent to their morality, stands above others. There will never be step-by-step directions for adopting an ethical lifestyle, therefore courage to accept and rise to the challenge proves necessary. Courage is needed to examine one’s beliefs and remain aware of how one’s value system could manifest in therapy and influence clients. Courage is necessary to reach out and seek guidance, consultation, and supervision in order to provide the best services for clients, and especially when ethical dilemmas arise. Courage is required to admit and recognize fallibility, and then implement a course of action to rectify mistakes. Courage is essential to continually reflect on one’s therapeutic abilities, refine skills, and remain knowledgeable of the latest developments in the field. Courage is vital to confront a co-worker or supervisor whose ethical compass is amiss. Courage is critical for living each day exemplifying best practices. All in all, courage proves to be a core component of what drives the most ethically-bound counselors. Certainly, courage to
operate in the most ethical manner possible will shine through and inspire others, both in and outside the counseling profession.
References


