Courage: The Epitome of Ethical Behavior for Counselors

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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 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, R. R., & Claus, R.E., 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, M. T., Michael, J. L., & Jodi, L. S., 2004). So then, what distinguishes a counselor who adheres to an already agreed-upon protocol of ethics from a counselor who epitomizes aspirational ethics, the highest standards of conduct one can embody?

It is asserted that the most favorable ethical posture for counselors to possess comes from within and decisions based on personal conscience (May, K., 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, T.P., &
Herlihy, B., 2001). One value not identified as necessary for an ethical counselor, but perhaps the most vital one to demonstrate is courage. Just as living involves taking risks, so also counseling require taking risks, hence the need for courage. To elaborate, the counselor may choose an intervention that proves inefficient or that mistakenly reinforces the client’s defense mechanisms. 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, S., 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 does in a manner congruent to their morality, stands above others. There will never be step-by-step directions for adopting an ethical lifestyle, thus courage to accept and rise to the challenge proves necessary. Courage is needed to examine and question one’s beliefs and possible negative effects on 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 questions one’s therapeutic abilities and refine one’s skills. Courage is vital to confront a co-worker or supervisor who’s 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


