

A Practitioner's Guide to Ethical Decision Making

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Introduction

Counselors are often faced with situations which require sound ethical decision making ability. Determining the appropriate course to take when faced with a difficult ethical dilemma can be a challenge. To assist ACA members in meeting this challenge, the ACA Ethics Committee has developed A Practitioner's Guide to Ethical Decision Making. The intent of this document is to offer professional counselors a framework for sound ethical decision making. The following will address both guiding principles that are globally valuable in ethical decision making, and a model that professionals can utilize as they address ethical questions in their work.

Moral Principles

Kitchener (1984) has identified five moral principles that are viewed as the cornerstone of our ethical guidelines. Ethical guidelines can not address all situations that a counselor is forced to confront. Reviewing these ethical principles which are at the foundation of the guidelines often helps to clarify the issues involved in a given situation. The five principles, autonomy, justice, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and fidelity are each absolute truths in and of themselves. By exploring the dilemma in regards to these principles one may come to a better understanding of the conflicting issues.

1. Autonomy is the principle that addresses the concept of independence. The essence of this principle is allowing an individual the freedom of choice and action. It addresses the responsibility of the counselor to encourage clients, when appropriate, to make their own decisions and to act on their own values. There are two important considerations in encouraging clients to be autonomous. First, helping the client to understand how their decisions and their values may or may not be received within the context of the society in which they live, and how they may impinge on the rights of others. The second consideration is related to the client's ability to make sound and rational decisions. Persons not capable of making competent choices, such as children, and some individuals with mental handicaps, should not be allowed to act on decisions that could harm themselves or others.

2. Nonmaleficence is the concept of not causing harm to others. Often explained as "above all do no harm", this principle is considered by some to be the most critical of all the principles, even though theoretically they are all of equal weight (Kitchener, 1984; Rosenbaum, 1982; Stadler, 1986). This principle reflects both the idea of not inflicting intentional harm, and not engaging in actions that risk harming others (Forester-Miller & Rubenstein, 1992).
3. Beneficence reflects the counselor's responsibility to contribute to the welfare of the client. Simply stated it means to do good, to be proactive and also to prevent harm when possible (Forester-Miller & Rubenstein, 1992).
4. Justice does not mean treating all individuals the same. Kitchener (1984) points out that the formal meaning of justice

useful guideline is to examine the problem from several perspectives and avoid searching for a simplistic solution.

2. Apply the ACA Code of Ethics.

After you have clarified the problem, refer to the Code of Ethics (ACA, 2005) to see if the issue is addressed there. If there is an applicable standard or several standards and they are specific and clear, following the course of action indicated should lead to a resolution of the problem. To be able to apply the ethical standards, it is essential that you have read them carefully and that you understand their implications.

If the problem is more complex and a resolution does not seem apparent, then you probably have a true ethical dilemma and need to proceed with further steps in the ethical decision making process.

3. Determine the nature and dimensions of the dilemma.

There are several avenues to follow in order to ensure that you have examined the problem in all its various dimensions.

- o Consider the moral principles of autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity. Decide which principles apply to the specific situation, and determine which principle takes priority for you in this case. In theory, each principle is of equal value, which means that it is your challenge to determine the priorities when two or more of them are in conflict.
- o Review the relevant professional literature to ensure that you are using the most current professional thinking in reaching a decision.
- o Consult with experienced professional colleagues and/or supervisors. As they review with you the information you have gathered, they may see other issues that are relevant or provide a perspective you have not considered. They may also be able to identify aspects of the dilemma that you are not viewing objectively.
- o Consult your state or national professional associations to see if they can provide help with the dilemma.

4. Generate potential courses of action.

Brainstorm as many possible courses of action as possible. Be creative and consider all options. If possible, enlist the assistance of at least one colleague to help you generate options.

5. Consider the potential consequences of all options and determine a course of action.

Considering the information you have gathered and the priorities you have set, evaluate each option and assess the potential consequences for all the parties involved. Ponder the implications of each course of action for the client, for others who will be effected, and for yourself as a counselor. Eliminate the options that clearly do not give the desired results or cause even more problematic consequences. Review the remaining options to determine which option or

gain, and (4) can justify his or her actions as the best judgment of what should be done based upon the current state of the profession" (p.58). Following this model will help to ensure that all four of these conditions have been met.

References

American Counseling Association (2005). Code of Ethics. Alexandria, VA: Author.

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