

## **Ethical and Professional Boundaries in Client-Counselor Relationships**

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**Abstract**

There are many types of boundaries in the client-counselor relationship, all of which can foster a sense of trust and security when adhered to. In order to adhere to these boundaries, counselors must first be aware of these boundaries and their potential to cross them. Boundaries for professional counselors are outlined by law and ethical code. Counselors must take proper precautions in regards to boundaries to maintain ethical and professional relationships with clients.

*Keywords:* boundaries, client-counselor relationship, boundary violations

### **Ethical and Professional Boundaries in Client-Counselor Relationships**

Phillip Hemphill's presentation *Understanding Professional Boundaries and Ethics: A Practical Model* (2015) covers what boundaries in the client-counselor relationship look like and how they may be violated by counselors and clients. These boundaries are set forth by law, ethical code, or the counselor themselves. Having a working understanding and awareness of boundaries is necessary in the therapeutic relationship and can benefit both the client and the counselor.

### **What are Boundaries?**

Boundaries make a distinction between what is included and what is excluded from the client-counselor relationship (Cowles, M., & Griggs, M., 2018). These boundaries can benefit the relationship by building trust, creating a sense of safety and stability, and allowing an appropriate level of vulnerability between the client and counselor. Types of boundaries found in the therapeutic relationship include time, role, location, physical touch, money, communication, and culture (Hemphill, P., 2015). Boundary violations are unethical and exploitative breaches that cause harm to the patient (Corey et al., 2017). Boundary crossing, which is not as serious as a boundary violation, is a minor deviation from the typical counseling treatment but is not harmful in and of itself. While there are firm professional and ethical boundaries in the counseling profession, such as the prohibition of sexual or romantic relationships with clients, some boundaries are more ambiguous and may change depending on the context of a given situation (Hemphill, P., 2015).

### **Client-Counselor Boundary Issues**

Counselors must be aware of their boundaries and know when they have violated them to keep relationships with clients as ethical and professional as possible (Hemphill, P., 2015). Some

common boundary issues that counselors struggle with include excessive self-disclosure, using non-clinical language regarding a client, poor time management, poor awareness and management of emotions, and lack of self-care. Some counselors may feel an overwhelming responsibility towards their clients, feeling the need to work despite illness or conflict of interest. To be more effective with clients, counselors must also be aware of and attend to their own physical and mental health (Barton, H., 2019). While some boundary issues may arise from normal human struggles, having an awareness of them can help the counselor determine the best course of action to take; whether that be speaking with a superior to help manage those emotions, speaking openly to the client about those emotions when appropriate, or referring the client to another counselor (Hemphill, P., 2015).

One of the primary boundary struggles that counselors face is simply not being aware that they have crossed or violated a boundary (Hemphill, P., 2015). Boundary violations do not always happen abruptly- the slippery slope phenomenon is a gradual erosion of boundaries leading to increasingly unethical behavior (Corey et al., 2017). Due to the independent nature of the counseling field, inadequate oversight in decision-making can contribute to a lack of boundary awareness (Hemphill, P., 2015).

Boundary issues on the part of the client may arise from the role imbalance in the client-counselor relationship (Hemphill, P., 2015). Clients entrust counselors with their wellbeing, possibly leading the client to have an unrealistic view of their counselor. A client may idolize their counselor, view them as a parental figure, or place them on a pedestal. Clients can have inappropriate reactions to their counselor based on how they view them- excessive attachment, sexual attraction, belief that there is a secret or special bond, or negative emotional responses.

### **Boundaries in Ethical Code**

The American Counselor Association (ACA) *Code of Ethics* (2014) includes instruction on ethical boundaries for situations such as dual relationships, social invitations, business dealings, and gift-giving. For each instance that could extend the counseling relationship beyond professional parameters, the ACA *Code of Ethics* asks the counselor to consider the potential benefits or risks of crossing those boundaries. If it is determined that it is beneficial to cross a boundary, the ACA requires that counselors “take appropriate professional precautions such as informed consent, consultation, supervision, and documentation to ensure that judgment is not impaired and no harm occurs.” (American Counseling Association, 2014).

The American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2016) issues similar warnings for extending professional boundaries in the context of a school setting. Students may invite their school counselor to participate in school-related activities such as distant sports events or concerts, the pros and cons of which should be weighed by the school counselors. The ASCA warns school counselors not to use personal digital accounts when communicating with students, and to adhere to professional, ethical, and legal standards when communicating through school-approved technology.

The Virginia Board of Counseling’s *Regulations Governing the Practice of Professional Counseling* (2021) contains regulations regarding the boundaries of dual relationships as well as romantic or sexual relations with a client. It also includes a requirement that counselors practice in a manner that does not harm, which would imply not violating client-counselor boundaries. The Virginia Board of School Counseling does not contain specific regulations regarding boundaries.

### **Response and Action**

To avoid and prevent boundary violations in the therapeutic relationship, counselors need to seek out and receive further education on boundaries (Hemphill, P., 2015). Because a lack of boundary awareness is a major issue for counselors, they must familiarize themselves with the laws and code of ethics regarding boundaries. Counselors should also regularly reflect on their actions, wellbeing, and history and ask themselves how these factors may be impacting their clients (Kremer, P. et al., 2018). Supervision is an important factor in keeping client-counselor relationships ethical and professional, as a supervisor should have an objective view of what goes on in those relationships.

Maintaining boundaries in the role of a school counselor may be difficult as the clients are students that you see around the school every day, in the classroom when instructing, and possibly outside of school at community events. The prevalence of modern forms of communication that students prefer to use, such as texting, may present an added difficulty as they are not appropriate in the therapeutic relationship. School counseling is a counseling profession just like any other, and the appropriate ethical and legal guidelines still must be adhered to, with consideration for individual circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

Professional and ethical boundaries in the counseling relationship can help build a better relationship when followed appropriately. Education, supervision, and self-reflection can help a counselor to recognize and prevent potential boundary issues. Legal and ethical code on boundaries in the client-counselor relationship reach the consensus that no harm may be done to the client by the counselor. An effective counselor knows their boundaries and takes steps to prevent them from being crossed.

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## **Applying the Ethical Decision-Making Model**

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### **Abstract**

Suicide is a difficult topic that many school counselors will have to deal with in the course of their careers. In making ethical decisions regarding students at risk of suicide, school counselors need to apply an ethical decision-making model that considers ethics, morality, and legality. For this ethical dilemma, we are presented with the case of Jason, a student who is at risk of suicide. The school counselor must select an approach for helping Jason that follows legal and ethical codes and is morally sound. By determining all potential courses of action and their consequences, the best course of action can be selected and followed through.

*Keywords:* ethical decision-making, suicide, school counselors, ethical codes, moral principles

### **Applying the Ethical Decision-Making Model**

Suicide and the risk of suicide needs to be taken seriously by school counselors as they are well-positioned to help prevent suicide through the services that they offer their students (Decou, C. R., 2019). Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the United States amongst those ages ten through thirty-four (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). To best serve students that are determined to be at risk for suicide, school counselors must thoroughly examine the ethical dilemmas they are presented by considering the code of ethics, moral principles, legal obligations, and possible outcomes to determine the best course of action.

### **Identify the Problem**

The ethical dilemma presented involves Jason, a seventh-grader, who is referred to the school counselor by a teacher. Jason has expressed suicidal intentions due to personal and family issues. The school counselor talks with Jason and determines that he is at imminent risk of suicide. The school counselor decides to contact Jason's parents, since he is a minor, and give them a list of local mental health counselors.

While the course of action that the school counselor took was not necessarily wrong, there are a few more steps they need to take to make sure they are helping Jason in the most ethical way and to the best extent of their abilities. Counseling is not always a profession in which you can follow a set protocol, each situation is different with its own unique gray areas to be considered (Hemphill, P., 2015). The school counselor in this situation needs to look at the specific details that Jason disclosed, consider ethical and moral codes, and determine the best course of action.

### **Apply the ACA Code of Ethics**

To ensure that counselors are making the best decisions by fulfilling their ethical and legal obligations, counselors need to be familiar with the American Counseling Association's (ACA) Code of Ethics. The ACA's Code of Ethics (2014) allows for the disclosure of confidential information when disclosure will protect clients from foreseeable harm. This tells us that the school counselor was not incorrect in informing Jason's parents of his suicidal ideation. However, there are additional codes that the counselor did not consider in deciding to disclose confidential information to a third party.

One consideration to be made is whether disclosing Jason's risk of suicide to his parents would cause harm to come to him by his parents. The Code of Ethics (2014) states that, "Counselors act to avoid harming their clients ... and to minimize or to remedy unavoidable or unanticipated harm" (p.4). To avoid harming Jason through disclosure, the school counselor should consider Jason's admission of family problems. The school counselor could determine the extent of the family problems by having a more in-depth conversation with Jason. If members of Jason's family are abusing him, disclosing his suicidal thoughts to them could potentially make the abuse worse. The school counselor should do their best to avoid causing any harm to Jason by taking his relationship with his family into account in the decision to disclose confidential information to them.

Another step that the school counselor missed was involving Jason in the disclosure of his private information to his parents. To the extent possible, clients should be informed that confidential information will be disclosed and be involved in the decision-making process regarding the disclosure (American Counseling Association, 2014). Based on the information given, it does not seem that Jason was told that his parents were going to be notified nor was he involved in the process of notifying them. This code should be reflected on alongside the

mandate to avoid harming clients as there is the potential for the process of disclosure to cause Jason significant emotional distress, in which case he should not be involved. While the counselor was correct to notify the parents, the way they went about it was not completely in keeping with ethical codes.

Referring Jason is the correct course of action because Jason's problem is outside the scope of the school counselors' services and competencies. However, the counselor could potentially violate the ACA's Code of Ethics by not following through with Jason's referral. Simply printing out a list of resources is not enough for the counselor to have fulfilled their duty of care. The ACA's Code of Ethics (2014) states: "When counselors transfer or refer clients to other practitioners, they ensure that appropriate clinical and administrative processes are completed and open communication is maintained with both clients and practitioners" (p.6). The school counselor needs to make sure that the parents take the threat seriously and are going to immediately follow through in getting Jason professional help. This is especially important because Jason stated that he was having family problems.

### **Determine the Nature and Dimensions of the Dilemma**

Nonmaleficence is a basic moral principle that means refraining from actions that could result in harm (Corey et al., 2017). Counselors have a responsibility to minimize the potential for harm to their clients. The principle of nonmaleficence takes precedence in this case, as the school counselor should make it their priority to ensure that Jason comes to no harm through their actions. Jason is already at considerable risk of harm due to his suicidal thoughts, and the school counselor needs to take steps to minimize any potential for harm to come to Jason.

Maintaining nonmaleficence in this situation may become complicated when you take Jason's family issues into consideration. The standard for school counselors is to act on the

notion of potential suicide by immediately notifying parents or guardians (American School Counselor Association, 2018). The ethical and moral standards here come into conflict if Jason's parents are a contributing factor in his suicidal thoughts. Ethically, the school counselor needs to let Jason's parents know that he is at risk and direct them in getting him professional help. Morally, the school counselor needs to consider whether disclosing Jason's suicidal thoughts would cause more harm to come to him by his parents. If time allows for it, the counselor should consider consulting with appropriate professionals while maintaining Jason's privacy. The school counselor could also consult with the school's principal on the best course of action, although the principal may not have a complete understanding of a counseling professionals' obligations in this situation.

In this case, the moral principle of autonomy would go along with ethical code that states that clients should be included in the process of disclosure (American Counseling Association, 2014). Autonomy refers to the counselor's promotion of independent and self-governing behavior (Corey et al., 2017). However, these principles would go against the moral principle of maleficence if including Jason in the process of disclosing his suicidal ideation to his parents would cause him mental or physical harm. When a client is a danger to themselves, as Jason could be, they may not be in the right state of mind to be allowed to make decisions for themselves. Jason is also a minor, which means that in many situations he is not legally allowed to make decisions for himself yet.

Depending on how much time the school counselor took to consider their decision, they may put themselves at risk for violating the moral principle of fidelity. Fidelity entails creating a trusting therapeutic relationship (Corey et al., 2017). If the school counselor acts quickly to make a big decision on Jason's behalf such as calling his parents or even suggesting hospitalization,

they could risk damaging the client-counselor relationship (Gallo, L. L., 2018). Jason would no longer trust the school counselor with confidential information, ending the opportunity for long-term support at school.

### **Generate Potential Courses of Action**

For this case, there are several potential courses of action in each step that the school counselor took that could address the circumstances as well as the ethical and moral obligations of the situation. In speaking with Jason, the school counselor could have taken the opportunity to have a more in-depth conversation, using open-ended questions, to determine the nature of his family problems. The counselor could also use this conversation to calm Jason; since he is at imminent risk of suicide, he is likely experiencing some emotional turmoil and could use help feeling calm and stable.

If the school counselor determines that Jason is in an abusive situation, the school counselor needs to immediately report to the appropriate authorities (Tuttle et al., 2019). School counselors are mandated reporters who have a responsibility to report suspected child abuse to authorities such as Child Protective Services (CPS), law enforcement, social workers, case managers, and attorneys (Tuttle et al., 2019). If the school counselor suspects that the threat of abuse is severe, they should work with authorities to make sure that Jason has a safe place to go. The school counselor can also work with the authorities to make sure that he receives the counseling that he needs.

If the counselor determines that Jason's family problems are not related to abuse, then the counselor may proceed with disclosure to his family. The school counselor has the option to include Jason in the disclosure of his risk of suicide to his family and should make that decision based on Jason's current mental and emotional state. While it is part of the ACA's ethical code

that clients be included in the disclosure decision-making process, this is only the most ethical option if it does not cause further harm to the patient (American Counseling Association, 2014). The counselor could remind Jason of their responsibility to inform his parents and ask whether he would like to be included on that call. The counselor also has the option to only let Jason know that his parents will be informed, and then make that call in private. The final option in the way of disclosure would be, after concluding that it would be too harmful to Jason's mental health, to not include him at all.

In disclosing to Jason's parents that he is at imminent risk of suicide, the most important thing to determine is that they are taking the threat seriously and will take him to see a professional. If parents of a student do not take a potential threat seriously, school counselors are to make a report to CPS (American School Counselor Association, 2018). Since the parents may be unfamiliar with seeking clinical mental health treatment, the counselor should give specific recommendations and walk the parents through the process of setting up an appointment. Once Jason has been seen by a therapist, the school counselor and the therapist should consult and collaborate to help improve Jason's conditions at school.

### **Consider the Potential Consequences of all Options and Determine a Course of Action**

The course of action that would be most beneficial in making the ethically and morally right choice in this situation would be to obtain more information from Jason. Without a more conclusive picture of what is going on in Jason's life, the school counselor cannot predict what moral or ethical dilemmas they might run into. The potential consequences in this case could worsen Jason's already at-risk mental and emotional state; the counselor needs to think through their options carefully and take their obligation to do no harm seriously. If it is determined that Jason is being abused by his parents, the school counselor would notify CPS and work with them

to get him referred to a counselor. If it is determined through a deeper conversation that Jason is not being abused by his parents, then the counselor would proceed with disclosure.

While including Jason in the process of disclosure may help give him a sense of control over the situation, it may also have unintended negative consequences. Informing Jason that his parents will be notified could cause him to become angry and lose trust in the school counselor if the counselor has not been clear about the limits of confidentiality. However, not telling Jason that his parents are going to be notified and having him find out when he goes home could be a worse option. Including Jason on the phone call when he is already having family issues could cause him to become emotional or even cause a fight to ensue.

The best course of action here would be to remind Jason that his parents will have to be notified per informed consent and that the school counselor will do their best to ensure that the risk will be communicated with as little of his personal information being compromised as possible. The school counselor should make this call in private while someone else is brought in to help and monitor Jason. On this call, the counselor needs to ensure that Jason's parents are taking the threat seriously and make sure they are going to get him the help he needs.

### **Evaluate the Selected Course of Action**

The selected course of action would satisfy legal and ethical obligations as well as most moral obligations. The school counselor would have fulfilled their duties outlined in the ACA's Code of Ethics: disclosing to a minor's parent or guardian when they are at risk of harm, informing a client before confidential information is disclosed, avoiding and minimizing harm, and following through on referrals. Morally, the counselor would have done their best to fulfill nonmaleficence, although counselors can only minimize the risk of harm that they can foresee. While informing Jason that his parents would be notified could give him some small sense of

autonomy, he does not truly get a say in the situation because of the school counselors' legal obligations. Fidelity is the most precarious moral principle in this situation as it depends on how Jason reacts to the situation. It is very likely in any situation where parents have to be informed.

This course of action needs to pass the tests of justice, publicity, and universality to ensure that it is appropriate (Forester-Miller, H., Davis, T., 1996). The test of justice is determining whether you would treat others the same in this situation. While this course of action is applicable to this specific set of circumstances, I believe that it is fair and considerate enough to apply to a student in a similar situation. The test of publicity asks whether you would want your behavior reported in the press. Since the school counselor took their time to determine the most ethically and morally right course of action in this situation, the school counselor should have no qualms about their actions being reported in the press. The test of universality assesses whether the same course of action could be recommended to another counselor in the same situation. Since this course of action meets the requirements it needs to and more, it could be recommended to other counselors. This course of action passes the tests of justice, publicity, and universality.

### **Implement the Course of Action**

When all the different options and their consequences have been thought out, the school counselor needs to choose their course of action and follow through on it. This case is a difficult and sensitive one, especially because Jason is a minor in a vulnerable situation. The school counselor will need to be gentle and use their best decision-making skills. The counselor should take Jason to a private space and speak with him, letting him know that he is cared for and that the counselor wants to make sure he is safe. The counselor needs to gather enough information to determine whether they will be calling CPS or Jason's parents. The counselor will then notify

Jason that his parents must be informed of his imminent risk of suicide. In notifying Jason's parents, the counselor will ensure that the parents are taking the situation seriously and are following up on getting him an appointment as soon as possible. The counselor would be wise to ask that Jason's parents or a guardian come pick him up to make sure that he gets home safely. After implementing this course of action, the school counselor should follow up and make sure that this course of action had the intended effect of helping Jason and that he continues to see a therapist. The counselor should evaluate the outcomes of this course of action and determine how any negative outcomes may be avoided in the future. By assessing the course of action chosen for this situation, the counselor will be better prepared for similar situations in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the morally gray nature of counseling, not every legal, ethical, and moral principle can be completely satisfied without coming into conflict with each other. However, the counselor will have considered which principles take priority and do not have the potential to bring harm to Jason. The school counselor will have stayed true to their legal, ethical, and moral obligations by taking the time to think through Jason's situation and gathering the necessary information to choose the most beneficial course of action.

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