

A case for personal therapy in counselor education

Among the many factors that influence a counselor's abilities, I have long believed that personal therapy is the most crucial. I was therefore quite surprised that when applying for my licensed professional counselor intern license, I had to formally appeal for acceptance of five personal therapy credits on my transcript. Through this process, I realized that the value of this vital learning experience is not necessarily recognized across the field, so I am petitioning here for what should be the central place of personal therapy in counselor education.

Some of the reasons I present for personal therapy echo classic arguments put forth since the early days of analytic training. Many of today's most admired clinicians still emphasize these points. For example, Irvin Yalom in *The Gift of Therapy* calls personal therapy a tuning of the "therapist's most valuable instrument ... the therapist's own self." Other insights stem from my particular experiences and growing understanding of how extensively counselors' self-explorations influence the clinical experience. Incidentally, all the reasons I present make it clear that personal therapy benefits not only beginner counselors but also all other mental health practitioners regardless of their years of experience.

Increasing empathy

As counselors, we ask much of our clients in the process of therapy. We entreat them to sit with a stranger and, over time, reveal themselves, explore difficult emotions, strive for self-awareness and work to transfer what they have learned to their lives outside the consulting room. This is a demanding, courageous act. How can beginner counselors un-

derstand what they are asking of clients unless these counselors have undergone their own therapy?

I believe sitting in the client's chair weekly — experiencing exactly what it is like to be the client — would greatly increase beginner counselors' empathy. No other aspect of counselor education provides this firsthand knowledge of the client experience: the frustrations, the successes, the challenges. Counselors who have participated in their own personal therapy will have greater empathy for their clients *because they have been there*. As the psychologist James Hillman wrote in a 1982 newsletter for the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, "Confronted with the unbearable in my own nature, I show more trepidation — which is after all the first piece of compassion."

Even if a counselor feels mentally well-balanced, through personal therapy he or she will still learn what it feels like to sit across from a counselor and to be understood (or, just as valuable, to be misunderstood) by a counselor. Whatever the extent of the counselor's personal issues, the experience of being a client forms an authentic, indelible client perspective in the novice counselor's mind that balances and augments the counselor-centric perspective.

Increasing patience and tolerance of uncertainty

By becoming clients themselves, beginner counselors gain an inner steadiness that increases their ability to help others. In learning self-acceptance and patience through personal therapy, beginner counselors will find it easier to be patient with clients and to respect each individual's unique process and pacing. It will also

become less of a challenge to tolerate the inevitable uncertainty and ambiguity of clinical work.

In my 2009 master's thesis research, the clinicians I interviewed said both clinical *and* personal experiences with uncertainty made it easier for them to tolerate uncertainty with clients. In that vein, I believe undergoing therapy is a personal encounter with uncertainty that greatly increases a counselor's comfort with not knowing. In the face of clinical uncertainty or client pressure, such a counselor is less likely to hastily intervene or diagnose in an unconscious attempt to run away from his or her discomfort, thus leaving space for the potential of true therapeutic progress. All the clinicians I interviewed said allowing themselves to remain in uncertainty forestalled premature action on their part and allowed unforeseen possibilities to arise.

Personal therapy helps new counselors learn patience and calmness in the unpredictable waters of clinical work. Without personal therapy, I believe counselors are more susceptible to acting prematurely and subverting the difficult and fallow periods so crucial to therapeutic progress. (Counselors must remember, however, that some clients might be harmed by sustained uncertainty and require more structure in clinical work.)

Facilitating therapy

The self-knowledge gained through personal therapy is a vital tool for counselors. One of the less often discussed benefits of this self-knowledge is that it facilitates therapy. Counselors' heightened awareness of their feelings provides, as Yalom describes, "the best source of reliable data" about clients.

Counselors' spontaneous responses to their clients are a unique, and sometimes uncannily accurate, window into clients' experiences. Further, an enhanced awareness of their feelings can help counselors discern projective identification, which is the therapist's internalization of a feeling the client is experiencing but is not aware of or cannot tolerate. In short, if beginner counselors are not fully aware of and comfortable with their feelings, they lose a valuable resource for understanding their clients.

Preventing client harm through self-knowledge

I believe the self-knowledge gained through personal therapy is also central to a counselor's ethical responsibilities. The *ACA Code of Ethics* states that "Counselors act to avoid harming their clients" (Standard A.4.a.) and "Counselors are aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors and avoid imposing values that are inconsistent with counseling goals" (Standard A.4.b.). This suggests to me that self-knowledge is critical to avoid doing harm.

Most essentially, the self-awareness

gained from personal therapy provides crucial insight into sources of countertransference with clients. A working understanding of personal behaviors and feelings dramatically increases beginner counselors' awareness of their unique biases, neurotic issues and blind spots and how these might surface in clinical work. Without such awareness, a new counselor could, unknowingly and with good intentions, respond to clients in a manner that is rooted in the counselor's own unexamined issues. Having undergone personal therapy, counselors are more likely to recognize, and pause to reflect on, sources of impulses with clients.


Preventing client harm through self-care

Personal therapy is a core component of counselor self-care, which is another means of preventing client harm. Standard C.2.g. of the *ACA Code of Ethics* says, "Counselors are alert to the signs of impairment from their own physical, mental or emotional problems and refrain from offering or providing professional services when such impairment is likely to harm a client or others. They

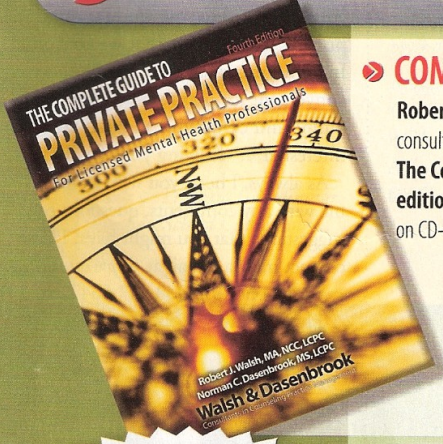
seek assistance for problems that reach the level of professional impairment."

Though this ethical obligation is one of the more obvious arguments for personal therapy, my concern is that the climate in the mental health field is such that some counselors seek personal therapy *only* as a reactive measure in difficult situations.

Requiring therapy as part of counselor education, on the other hand, would teach counselors early in their careers to recognize and cope with difficult personal mental or emotional circumstances and decrease chances that such problems would go untended for long periods. In fact, the level of stress experienced by novice counselors — who are attending graduate school, embarking on a new career path and sitting with therapy clients for the first time — makes the counselor education curriculum an ideal forum for teaching the importance of self-care through personal therapy. Building personal therapy into the educational process would also mitigate any initial tendencies by beginner counselors to casually dismiss the impact of their personal circumstances on work with clients.



PRIVATE PRACTICE: Starting or Expanding?



➤ COMPLETE GUIDE TO PRIVATE PRACTICE 4TH EDITION

Robert J. Walsh, MA, NCC, LCPC and Norman C. Dasenbrook, MS, LCPC, authors and consultants, continue to help hundreds of counselors start and expand successful private practices. **The Complete Guide to Private Practice for Licensed Mental Health Professionals 4th edition** offers the latest, updated practice information and includes all the private practice forms on CD-ROM.

➤ 4TH EDITION TOPICS INCLUDE

- 8 Step Start Up Method
- Marketing and Advertising
- Billing Options and Fee Collection
- Office Set Up With Minimal Investment
- Successfully Deal With Insurance and Managed Care
- HIPAA Information
- ACA Code Of Ethics Transfer Plan
- How To Buy Or Sell a Private Practice

AND MUCH MORE

➤ ORDER YOUR COPY TODAY! CALL 1.815.877.0399

Visit us on the web for more information on The Complete Guide, Consultation Service and Seminars at: www.Counseling-Privatepractice.com Secure Online Ordering!

The American Counseling Association and Walsh and Dasenbrook, have formed a collaborative initiative as a new service to members to bring timely information on private practice issues to the membership. Please log on the ACA's website www.counseling.org for the latest private practice information. Look for Walsh and Dasenbrook's question and answer column, Private Practice in Counseling, in Counseling Today.


ONLY \$84.99!

VISA & MC ACCEPTED

CALL 1.815.877.0399

Secure Online Ordering!

www.Counseling-Privatepractice.com



American Counseling Association

Decreasing the stigma of psychotherapy

Counselors are sometimes reluctant to seek personal therapy, worried that it indicates they are less capable or flawed as helpers. We should consider the message this double standard sends to our clients and the public. In the September 2009 *New Perspectives* column in *Counseling Today*, clinician Jason King said, "If we refuse to participate in the services for which we advocate and base our career, what example are we setting for society and those marginalized and disenfranchised by oppressive systems? If we fear social stigma of counseling and diagnosis, then we are covertly reinforcing the shame and stigma associated with our profession."

The experience of personal therapy for novice counselors benefits not only the clinical dyad but also the profession overall because it decreases the stigma of therapy. Emphasizing personal therapy in the educational process would, early in counselors' careers, instill therapy as an accepted mental hygiene option, thus normalizing it, encouraging them to view it as another available tool and teaching them not to negatively judge its use by other counselors.

Going beyond supervision

In considering the importance of personal therapy for beginner counselors, I want to briefly emphasize that the benefits of personal therapy cannot be obtained through the supervisory relationship. Although supervision is helpful in highlighting and discussing how the counselor's personal beliefs are impacting his or her clinical work, supervision is a client-focused endeavor. Supervision cannot (and, by definition, should not) function as personal therapy. It cannot provide the thorough attention necessary to fully understand the counselor's behaviors and beliefs. Therefore, it cannot give the new counselor a true taste of the client experience. Supervision can, however, be facilitated by personal therapy, providing the supervisory dyad with a more solid, broad foundation for understanding the counselor's experience and countertransference.

Conclusion

I have pointed out some of the key arguments for including personal therapy in counselor education, but these are far from all-inclusive. Neural science research, for example, suggests that it is neurologically important for counselors to have done their own therapy work, as discussed in the book *A General Theory of Love*.

Given the benefits of personal therapy, I advocate that, at a minimum:

- The next revision of the *ACA Code of Ethics* should explicitly state that personal therapy is an ethical obligation.
- All counseling-related graduate programs should require personal therapy for students.
- All state licensing boards should accept transcript credits granted for personal therapy. Ideally, all licensing boards should require that applicants have undergone personal therapy to apply for counselor intern licensing.

Without personal therapy, I believe beginner counselors are handicapped—counseling others without knowing the potential impact and resource of their own psyches and applying knowledge without having experienced its truth from the inside out. To be effective, aware and ethical in our work with clients, we must have undergone our own therapeutic work. ♦

Amanda Norcross is an ACA member and an LPC intern working in Austin, Texas. Contact her at amanda@amandanorcross.com, or visit her website at amandanorcross.com.

Letters to the editor:
ct@counseling.org

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Continued from page 7

I also want to share something that will impact students and all other ACA members this year. When we can do something to hold down costs, that is a good thing. When we can "go green" and be more attentive to conserving our natural resources, that is also good. When we can do both simultaneously, the benefits are even better. I am pleased to tell you that ACA has made the decision to move to an online voting system this year. This means that rather than sending out 42,000-plus paper ballots and providing a postage-paid return envelope to everyone, members will have the opportunity to go to a secure voting site and cast their votes. Biographical information about the candidates, including their qualifications, will be linked to the online election site so you can decide whom you want to vote for and then take care of this process online.

We want to see as many members vote as possible, so we will still make paper ballots available by request this year for those who would prefer to vote in that manner. The bottom line is that online voting will reduce the amount of paper, printing and postage that we consume. In addition, we think it will be more convenient for members to simply go online and cast their ballots. I will be interested in receiving your feedback.

As always, I hope you will contact me with any comments, questions or suggestions that you might have. Please contact me via e-mail at ryep@counseling.org or by phone at 800.347.6647 ext. 231.

Thanks and be well. ♦

Coming next month:

The power of groups