

Cross-Cultural Counseling: How to be More Effective

Counselors strive to create both a trusting relationship and a comfortable environment with all their clients so that the difficult task of healing therapy can begin. Today, clients seeking counseling come from an array of backgrounds, requiring counselors to know and understand the various ways culture impacts the counseling relationship. A lack of sensitivity to a client's unique background and experiences can result in miscommunication, a client's refusal to participate, and ultimately, an ineffective counseling relationship. These consequences can open the door to accusations of negligence, leading to discipline from your state licensing board or professional organization, or even a lawsuit.



Cultural competence is one of only a few competencies required of counselors in most state statutes. The American Counseling Association (ACA) set forth specific guidelines for providing counseling services to ethnically and culturally diverse populations in their ACA Code of Ethics.

Know the challenges

Language barriers are often the biggest challenge between ethnic clients and counselors. A communication problem left unexplored could lead to allegations of mistreatment or abuse. Always document the counseling session, and note the steps you took to understand and adjust to the client's individual culture. Also, remember that the goal of therapy is to understand the individual as a whole, not just his ethnic background.

Don't make assumptions about a client. For example, some cultures avoid eye contact as a sign of respect, but you'll need to understand whether the individual you're counseling is not looking at you out of

respect, or if he is feeling ashamed or uncomfortable, or being dishonest? If you assume a client's behavior stems from his culture without asking questions about how he's feeling, you may miss an opportunity for healing and set yourself up for liability.

A good way to avoid misassumptions is to educate yourself about the culture of your client. If you can't find literature sources about specific cultural expectations, seek the advice of other colleagues in your area who may have experience counseling within your client's culture. During a counseling session, it's also important to determine your client's level of

acculturation to the United States. Clients with low cultural assimilation may not understand that some of the behaviors you're counseling them about aren't acceptable in this country.

Openness and honesty are key

Culturally competent counselors invite open and honest dialogue about race and ethnicity in their therapeutic sessions and use professional resources and activities to develop their counseling skills with racially and ethnically diverse clients. As a counselor, you understand that all of your clients come to you with unique needs. Creating a treatment approach that respects the client's cultural identity as well as his individual characteristics will meet those needs while helping you avoid any legal liabilities.

Resources

Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development: www.amcdaca.org.

Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists: www.apa.org/pi/multiculturalguidelines.pdf

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The most common areas of concern for counselors are:

confidentiality/privacy; attorney referrals for licensure board and other issues requiring counsel; liability issues with regard to counseling of children including consent, pregnancy and custody; the duty to report child/elder abuse, crimes and unprofessional conduct; and summons and complaint/litigation process, complaints to state boards, and criminal complaints.

This information can be found in the ACA's monthly newsletter, *Legal & Regulatory Compliance*. If you're an ACA member you can subscribe or request a free brochure by calling: 800-347-6647, x222 or downloading a form at www.counseling.org/publications.

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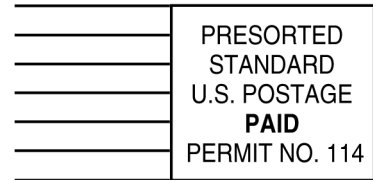
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Agree to Disagree: Handling Client Confrontations

Throughout the course of any counselor's career, there will be situations when it becomes necessary to directly confront a client about a particularly negative behavior, much to the client's dislike. This can be an unpleasant and draining experience at times. However, there are positive ways to handle confrontations that will leave both you and the client with an understanding of each other's views and, at the very least, an agreement to continue to work toward resolving the problem.

Confrontation could serve as a source of misunderstanding with a client and, thus, a source of risk for counselors. While state licensing boards differ on how to handle situations in which a counselor is accused of being insensitive, it's always important to be firm and professional. Before engaging in confrontation with a client, make sure to establish set rules. For example, be clear that your goal is to have a calm conversation and yelling or disrespectful behavior won't be tolerated. Also, be sure you are not belittling or "punishing" the client when making your point.

Stick to the issues

In their book, *The Power of Positive Confrontation*, authors Barbara Pachter and Susan Magee suggest using the acronym **WAC** during a confrontation to help you stick to the issues while working toward an acceptable solution. WAC stands for:

What's the real source of the conflict? Don't assign blame; just get to the root of the issue.

Ask what the client expects from the situation. Before jumping to conclusions, try to understand the issue fully. During the conversation, make sure you acknowledge the client's feelings and repeat her views back to her.

Check in with the client—find out what she's thinking. Keep an open mind throughout the discussion and try to understand the client's viewpoints.

Using this acronym to help you assess the situation may prove to be a valuable tool. Counselors must also pay close attention to non-verbal cues during a confrontation and make sure any non-verbal communication is in sync with what's being said. For example, don't smile while making a negative state-

ment. Speak in a soft, calm tone to convey empathy and make it clear that you're there to help. Should the conversation escalate into a heated discussion and the client become hostile or violent, it's important to call for help, be it a colleague or even 911.

Remember to document

A confrontation with a client could become a legal matter. Client records can be subpoenaed and may serve as the only proof that your conduct and decisions were in the best interest of the client. It's imperative to document any incident and record all efforts to ensure the health and safety of the client or anyone else involved. Document the reason for the confrontation, the rules to be followed, the setting, specific statements made, behavioral observations, follow up, effectiveness, and how it impacted the overall therapeutic plan.

Confrontations are never easy, but if you use WAC, keep calm, and document appropriately, you can keep conflict under control — and avoid possible legal action.

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