Coronavirus and Counseling:

Navigating the New Normal and Traversing the Landscape of COVID-19

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The counseling profession is having to creatively overcome obstacles presented by COVID-19. By coming together, with support from CSI and CACREP, the counseling profession can continue to ethically serve our communities and provide even more accessible services. To do this, we must be aware of the issues presented by COVID-19 and reframe them into opportunities to expand our competency within the counseling profession. With technology increasingly at the forefront of many services; counselors, counselor educators, and students are having to navigate incorporating technology into their education and sessions. Telehealth has become the norm in many fields and is becoming necessary as the pandemic restricts many from leaving their homes. While it seems simple to hold sessions with clients via tele-health, it raises some ethical concerns and risks for the client and counselor.

Screen fatigue and feeling emotionally drained is associated with a greater number of online meetings (Sander, 2020). This could potentially lead to burnout, which may compromise the ethical treatment of clients (Thompson, Amatea, & Thompson, 2014). COVID-19 and counselor burnout can increase risk for mental health issues. With the growth of online communication, it is important to weigh the pros and cons of tele-mental health services for clients. While it is easy to assume that telehealth is accessible and safe, there are situations in which tele-mental health is not the best option culturally or ethically. Assessing risk factors before providing tele-health sessions is imperative, including self-harm, suicide, and homicide; as well as the level of confidentiality that the client has at their location. Confidentiality is vital

to counseling and many clients lack the availability of a confidential space to fully experience the benefits of the session and to ensure client privacy. Practices also need to ensure that they are using a secure, HIPPA compliant platform (Wheeler, 2020). Accessibility to Wi-Fi, cell phones and lap-tops is often assumed of clients, but this priveledge is not always the reality for those experiencing housing insecurity, poverty, or housemates who have the ability to control usage of the needed technology. Counselors may only provide services in the state of which they are licensed which could raise issues if an individual is quarantining at a family members house out of state (Wheeler, 2016).

Cultural and ethical considerations must be taken with in-person sessions as well. There is a risk of illness for any in-person interaction, even if it is compliant with social distancing and mask mandates. It is ethically necessary that we consider the comfort level of the client and the underlying issues that may increase the risk of COVID-19. It is shown that those with certain underlying medical conditions are more susceptible to life threatening symptoms of the COVID-19 virus (CDC, 2020). Supervision is another area in which these factors must be considered, as student counselors and other supervisees are faced with the same risks. Consideration of access to technology, confidentiality of case discussions, and health concerns by both supervisor and supervisee must be taken.

While many of these factors can seem overwhelming as counselors and students navigate this new normal, reframing these issues as opportunities to grow alongside technology and society can lighten the burden. CSI principle number 8 is "mentoring, encouragement and empowerment" (Chi Sigma Iota Academy of Leaders, 1999). This is a time to exercise that principle through promoting counselor self-care and building a community of students and educators where they can support and learn from each other. Now, more than ever, counselor

self-care and a strong support system within the profession is needed and CACREP and CSI can assist with promoting these. Counselor educators are in the unique situation of having to support and teach their students about topics they are also experiencing for the first time. Holding council meetings for counselor educators where pressing topics such as safe practices, telehealth services, and the effects of the pandemic on client and counselor mental health would be beneficial. Another way in which CSI and CACREP can be a support to the profession is partnering with local universities, CACREP programs, and CSI chapters to develop and implement trainings on tele-mental health. In years past, tele-mental health was not the norm in counseling services and many insurance companies did not provide coverage for counseling via video chat (Wheeler, 2020). That is changing, to the benefit of many, and young counselors and students are having to figure out how to adapt their techniques to an online platform. Being the forefront of academic excellence and leadership, CACREP and CSI are the best candidates for providing tools to the next generation of counselors by offering education and insight on these services.

A way in which counselor educators can ensure the integrity of the profession is by promoting counselor self-care and providing support resources for counseling students. Counselor self-care is imperative to ethical service. This pandemic has brought hardship on many, and counselors and counseling students are certainly not excluded. Counselor educator awareness of screen fatigue, burnout and grief in their students as well as assisting them in creating and implementing their own self care plan is a practical, yet important, role in counseling education. Ensuring that supervision and support is provided at the counselor educator level is important in keeping countertransference in check with counseling students, as many are facing similar situations as their clients (Pies, 2020).

In conclusion, the counseling profession is adapting to the trials and tribulations that COVID-19 has thrown its way. While technology provides many opportunities to offer services from the safety of home, many cultural and ethical factors must be considered when making that choice. CSI and CACREP are both valuable to the integrity of counseling in supporting counselors as they to navigate the "new normal." While this year has provided many obstacles, counselors and counselor educators are given the opportunity to learn from them and expand competency in growing areas of the profession.

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