

Group Counseling

Lecture 12

Ethical Issues in Group Therapy

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Introduction

Every profession is guided by professional ethics and principles, and counseling practice is no exemption. Harmful practices in human service can be safeguarded by adherence to professional ethical codes and guidelines. Sometimes in some countries there is an act of parliament that controls the relevant activities of registered practitioners in certain professional engagements. In counseling practice, client harm reduction is made possible by counselors respecting human rights, client rights and always safeguarding the professional practice. In this lecture, we shall review ethics in counseling practice, identify ethical issues in counseling practice and how they interface with counseling standards and ethics in counseling practice setting like group work (Parsons & Dickison , 2017).

Expected Lecture Outcomes

At the end of this lecture, you will be expected to:

- i. Explain the term ethics in group counseling
- ii. Examine ethical issues in group counseling process
- iii. Discuss ethical interventions in group counseling

Defining Ethics

Ethics is generally defined as a philosophical discipline that is concerned with human conduct and moral decision making. Ethics is the study of morals or human conduct. It involves making decisions based on moral nature about people and their interactions in society. Ethics are normative in nature and focus on principles and standards that govern relationships between individuals. It could mean beliefs held about what constitutes the right conduct (AIPC, 2008).

Ethics in Group Counseling

Ethics in group counseling refer to beliefs that a group leader (counselor) should hold about what constitutes the right conduct or basically moral principles adopted by an individual group member or group. Ethics provide rules for right conduct during the group process. Group norms should embrace counseling ethics values and principles like respect for human dignity.

Rationale Behind Ethics in Group Counseling

As ethical issues are a significant focus of the right to care for clients in a social care setting, maintaining fluid enforcement of the caregiver's ethical standards are faced with challenges when dealing with groups and therapeutic care to each member of the group and for the whole group. One of the initial concerns of ethical group therapy involves the competency of the caregiver to provide adequate care within the boundaries of a group. Parsons & Dickinson (2017) states, "a core ethical responsibility of every human service provider is to do good on the client's behalf" (Parsons & Dickinson, 2017, p. 322). Without sufficient training for a group leader to facilitate a group care or counseling session, regardless of the size, the core element of doing good and cause no harm, will stand in

jeopardy and at risk of harm. The suitable ability can either lie in the sole power or training of the group therapist.

Ethical Issues in Group Counseling

These are related terms in ethics study and ethics and how they impact counseling work particularly group counseling (Taukeni, Mollaogiu, & Mollaogiu, 2024). In this lecture, we shall review related terms applied in ethics in group counseling and give related examples encountered in group counseling.

Morality

Morality refers to perspectives of right and proper conduct that involves an evaluation of actions based on some broader cultural context or standard. It covers good, bad, wrong, ought and should issues that guide human behavior and interactions. In group counseling this should be well explained with sensitivity to avoid harm. Group counseling should be guarded and guided by moral behavior.

Values

These are beliefs and attitudes that provide direction for everyday living. What values do you wish the group members to embrace while respecting diversity and inclusivity. Ensure that no member including yourself impose values on the members.

Ethical Conduct

This refers to a combination of knowledge and a clear conception of the principles that underlie an ethics code. As a group leader and present group members, ethical conduct must be always encouraged to avoid harm. A group leader should take responsibility for their own behavior and aim at being a role model for the rest.

Community Standards

These are societal principles that define what is considered reasonable behavior by individuals in a particular area or community. A group can be considered as a community because members share common goals and purpose. For the community to work in harmony, members must observe community standards or norms set. Alcoholic anonymous (AA) groups have twelve steps and traditions that act like community standards because members live them out in their own lives.

Law and Legal Issues

This refers to formally established rules regulating the conduct of people within a particular jurisdiction must be obeyed to avoid legal sanctions. In counseling, laws regulate the practice, ensuring that counselors adhere to standards that protect clients' rights and well-being. For example, confidentiality laws require counselors to protect clients' private information unless there is a risk of harm. This helps in interpretation of a problem from a legal perspective. Issues that are common in counseling include state licensure, child abuse, gender-based violence, suicide among others (Colman, 2015).

Ethical Practice

Ethical practice involves adhering to a set of moral principles and professional standards that guide behavior in professional settings. Ethical practice in counseling ensures that group counselors like other counselors act in the best interests of their clients, maintaining confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and avoiding conflicts of interest. For example, counselors must avoid dual relationships that could impair their professional judgment. This can be done through application of moral judgement, upholding human rights and practicing diversity and inclusivity always (Colman, 2015).

Professional Practice

Professional practice refers to the conduct and work carried out by someone in a professional capacity, adhering to the standards and guidelines of their profession. In counseling, professional practice includes maintaining competence through continuing education, seeking supervision, and adhering to ethical codes provided by the affiliate professional agencies, avoid dual relationships, review ethics and law to make informed decisions and act from the best interest of the clients.

Ethical Dilemma

An ethical dilemma is a situation in which a person must choose between two conflicting ethical principles or values. In counseling, ethical dilemmas often involve balancing the duty to maintain client confidentiality with the duty to protect the client or others from harm. For example, if a client reveals plans to harm someone, the counselor faces the dilemma of breaking confidentiality to prevent harm. Some problem situations in group counseling can introduce ethical dilemmas in counseling practice and the group leaders should be able to identify them and resolve them ethically and in time.

Minority Group

A minority group is a category of people differentiated from the social majority, often by characteristics such as ethnicity, race, religion, or sexual orientation. Counselors must be aware of the unique challenges faced by minority groups and provide multi-culturally competent services that serve all equally. For example, understanding the specific stressors and barriers faced by LGBTQ+ clients, survivors of sexual violence, people living with disability, low social status clients among other is crucial for effective group counseling.

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

Creating Safety

This includes physical and psychological safety. It also covers the qualities that a counselor should possess to make a client feel safe plus competencies and skills relevant to group therapy. In group counseling the venue should be a safe and secure place for members and the process too. Group counselors should be safe objects for the members and for the entire group throughout the process (Younggren & Harris, 2008).

Confidentiality

This entails keeping confidential and privileged reports and information private and safe. This is best demonstrated by signing a binding contract at the beginning of group counseling. Declaration should be made of the legal clauses that outline the boundaries and limitations of confidentiality and from time to time reviewed and shared to the group members.

Commitment and Responsibility

This denotes the duty to remain faithful to the terms of the contract and terms of working. The duty to warn and protect the members and the group interest is encouraged too. The group leader should model and encourage members to be committed to the process and take responsibility for their own mistakes during the process.

Avoid Dualism

Relationships that can compromise the quality of the group process and the group counselor should be avoided at all costs. Such relationships include flirting with group members,

engaging in business activities, going out for social events together and others. If possible, avoid being a therapist for your members.

Conflict Resolution

Certain conflicts, if allowed to escalate, can introduce issues of ethical considerations. Such issues were be discussed in week 11 as problem situations. If the group leader can resolve them in time, this would be healthy for the whole group. Mastery of conflict resolution skills is required for group counselors to maintain group cohesion and enhance performance.

Best Interest of the Group

This entails making credible reflections before, during and after the group process. All that a group leader does should be in the best interest of the group and the members. When a group leader acts in the best interest of the group, the members benefit and remain united for a common purpose.

Consultation and Supervision

A group leader should be open to consulting on matters of values, skills, knowledge and competencies needed in running the group. Clinical supervision provides both legal and professional guidance that is helpful to maintain group cohesion and performance. Regular clinical supervision will not only be helpful for professionalism but also as part of self-care for the leader and provision of best care for group members.

Self-care Practice

The group counselor, like individual counselor needs regular self-care and therapy if need be. All helpers are prone to burn out and stress with compassion fatigue. A well laid down self-care plan is recommended for group counselors. This may include taking breaks from the group work, retreat, meditation and any other positive outlet.

Steps to Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

The following are key guiding steps that help in resolving ethical dilemmas in group counseling:

- ❖ Identify the problem in the group (problem situation)
- ❖ Identify the underlying ethical issues in that problem
- ❖ Relate the problem to existing ethical codes and standards of the profession
- ❖ Brainstorm on possible solutions
- ❖ Pick out the best course of action
- ❖ Review the best course of action in terms of cost benefit analysis, reduction of harm to the client and the group leader
- ❖ Choose how to implement and who to implement the course of action taken
- ❖ Review the impact of the action taken
- ❖ Make new resolutions or policy changes going forward.

Conclusion

In this lecture, we have covered ethics and practice of ethics in group counseling. We have reviewed related ethical practice terms in group counseling context and suggested resolution to ethical dilemmas that may arise by outlining ethical decision-making process.

Informed changes to standards and ethical practice of counseling in group work may be made once a dilemma is resolved amicably.

References

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