



Hiring a former client as a counselor

Question: A former client has obtained his graduate degree in counseling and would like to work for me. Is that a possibility?

Answer: There are a few considerations when looking at interacting with a former client in any capacity, let alone at an employee level.

Some questions I would have: What is the individual's motivation in wanting to work for you? Does the individual want to work for you because of your experience or because you are the only counselor that he or she knows? Does the individual have other options for practice, or are options limited because of location constraints? If there are multiple options for counseling jobs, the individual might fair better with another employer. You may assist the individual in connecting with a viable option.

In 2005, the American Counseling Association changed from the concept of "dual relationships" to the concept of "beneficial versus harmful" relationships. ACA understood that, at times, current clients or former clients might want to interact with counselors in a different role. These interactions are possible, but a counselor needs to evaluate what is in the best interests of the client/former client.

In the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*, the idea evolved into managing and maintaining professional boundaries, and Standard A.6.e. was added. The standard discourages counselors from engaging in nonromantic relationships with former clients if the relationship could be potentially harmful to the individual. The questions a counselor needs to evaluate when considering whether to engage in such an interaction/relationship are:

- 1) Can I maintain objectivity?
- 2) Is this beneficial to the client?
- 3) What are the potential risks?

I would encourage a counselor involved in such a situation to walk through an ethical decision-making model, look at the situation from all angles and discuss all possible benefits and risks with the client or former client. That conversation should also be documented.

Topics for discussion could be:

- ❖ The extension of the professional boundaries (Standard A.6.a.)
- ❖ The role change in the professional relationship (Standard A.6.d.)
- ❖ How possible conflict will be addressed
- ❖ What happens if the former client needs to return to counseling (Standard F.6.c.)
- ❖ Client access to the past record (Standard B.6.e.)

As the supervisor, you are the one who will endorse this individual for licensure. Therefore, you are taking on the role of gatekeeper for the profession (Standards F.6.b. and F.6.d.).

The question to ask is whether you can maintain objectivity as an employer and treat this individual the same as you would any other counselor, or would your intimate knowledge of the individual from previous counseling sessions influence how you supervise and evaluate the individual? For example, if you knew that the former client was a survivor of sexual trauma, would you "excuse" countertransference if the individual had to counsel a convicted sex offender? Would you hold the expectation that the individual will be able to start at a running pace in comparison with other counselors because the former client is more familiar with how you operate as a counselor?

The individual needs to be made aware of all of these considerations so that he can have autonomy in evaluating the situation from all angles.



The questions addressed in this column are submitted by ACA members for educational purposes. Submit questions or comments to mwade@counseling.org with the subject line "Ethics Column." As a reminder, a benefit of ACA membership is personal ethical consultations through the ACA Ethics Department at 800.347.6647 ext. 314 or ethics@counseling.org. ♦

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