

Ethical guidelines when working with groups

Question: My supervisor has asked me to conduct a group in my counseling agency geared toward adolescents who have been victims of sexual assault. How do I ensure that I am adhering to all ethical guidelines when starting a group of this nature?

Answer: There are many guidelines counselors need to follow when preparing for and conducting group work, especially with minors. The relevant standards from the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* are A.1.a., A.1.b., A.2.a., A.2.b., A.2.d., A.9.a., A.9.b. and B.4.a.

When working with groups, make sure group members understand that the *group* is the client. Therefore, your primary responsibility is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of the group.

Sexual assault is a sensitive subject. Be sure to address all possible risks with your supervisor in planning for this group to ensure that you are protecting the clients from any further trauma. Also, as a supervisee, you should look at standards F.1. (Counselor Supervision and Client Welfare) and C.2.a. (Boundaries of Competence). When working with survivors of sexual assault, you need to be competent and receive proper supervision for such a group. Make sure that you have the necessary training to conduct this group. If this is a new specialty area for you, consult with your supervisor to ensure your competence and to protect clients from potential harm. It may be important to research different curricula or educational materials for potential use and then pursue proper training to use them.

After you have begun the group planning process, it is important to

screen the prospective group participants. Make sure the participants' needs and goals are in line with the goals of the group and will not impede the group process. If a prospective group member is deemed not appropriate for the group, refer that individual to a different service or possibly a different group or counselor that will better meet the individual's needs.

When conducting the informed consent process with minors, it is important to include the minor's parent or legal guardian. The parent and client have the ethical right to choose whether they are comfortable being in the group setting. The adolescent and parent need to know that the purpose of the group is to process the adolescent's own experiences and feelings about the sexual assault. This could be uncomfortable and difficult at times. Therefore, the parent and adolescent should be informed of any other possible limitations and potential risks.

Advise them about your goals for the group, the techniques and procedures that you will be using and the benefits of the group. Articulate to them your qualifications, credentials and relevant experience with this subject matter and clientele. Explain the importance of confidentiality, and also describe the limitations of that confidentiality. Inform them that your supervisor and possibly other team members from your agency will be involved in the group members' care and may consult with you on the group process. If the client and parent agree to the terms, be sure that you have the proper documentation and parent signature on file. Also work with your supervisor to develop a fitting progress

note template that can adequately depict the client's progress in the group.

As always, a key to resolving any ethical dilemma is to consult with other counselors, refer to ACA standards and document the decision-making process and rationale for the decision so that you can provide an explanation if the decision is later called into question. It is also important to reflect back on any ethical decision to make sure that the decision was made effectively.



The question addressed in this column is an example of an ethical dilemma faced by counselors. This information is presented for educational purposes only. 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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