



Navigating fight, flight or freeze: Developing courage and the freedom to ACT

Are you a counselor-in-training afraid of making a mistake? Are you a newly licensed professional counselor who is unsure about your ability to provide effective services? Or are you an experienced counselor who has begun to question your effectiveness and ability to engage in ethical decision-making?

If so, you are not alone. As counselor educators and supervisors, we often observe counselors-in-training and novice counselors who are experiencing high rates of anxiety. This affects not only the therapeutic relationship but also the ethical decision-making process.

Counselors are often terrified of making mistakes. In fact, as Jeffrey Kottler and Diane Blau assert in *The Imperfect Therapist: Learning From Failure in Therapeutic Practice*, “The conspiratory neglect of facing failure is pervasive, not only in the field but in the evolution of a therapist’s life.”

Faced with new challenges, some counselors become so consumed by fear that they can experience the biological mechanism of fight, flight or freeze. Much like the proverbial deer in the headlights, the counselor is paralyzed by fear and unable to act. Or, when forced to make a decision, counselors will fight intensely for their position, rigidly adhering to the letter of the *ACA Code of Ethics*. Or, in another scenario, they might even avoid making a decision because the ambiguity is too much to tolerate.

This fear and uncertainty can create avoidance, immobility or rigid thinking that can negatively impact the ethical

decision-making process. Counselors-in-training, new counselors in the field and perhaps even experienced counselors in new therapeutic environments may fear making the wrong decision in any number of situations. Specifically, they may fear making decisions or behaving in a way that is inconsistent with the *ACA Code of Ethics* or the culture of the organization. Counselors may believe that making a mistake means they are imperfect and thus have no value to the profession. This dichotomous thinking is unhelpful; it can lead to robotic thinking rather than reflective thinking.

Tools and strategies

To combat this phenomenon, counselor educators often emphasize interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness for counselors-in-training. They encourage processing the experience fully to navigate ethical decision-making and to move forward in the therapeutic relationship. The goal is to promote the development of counselors who are able to engage in reflective practice and strive toward aspirational ethics.

The introduction to the *ACA Code of Ethics* outlines the purpose of the code and specifically invites “reflection on the ethical standards contained in each part of the *ACA Code of Ethics*.” In this manner, counselors are encouraged to reflect upon self-awareness, the interpersonal experience and the ethical standards inherent within the profession. This emphasis on purposeful, meaningful and reflective practice is clearly and understandably embraced by the counseling profession.

In addition to personal reflection and consideration of ethical standards, we suggest counselors consider other concepts when feeling fearful or questioning their ethical decision-making process. Methods for navigating the fight, flight or freeze response include constructs related to acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT).

ACT emphasizes acceptance of unwanted feelings and openness to experience while embracing flexibility. It is a present-focused method that stresses taking action rather than avoiding situations or applying rigid decisions. In ACT, it is important to accept one’s emotions and responses without being controlled by them. It is essential to separate emotional responses from reasoning, although it may be necessary to attend to one’s feelings when implementing decisions.

It is also vital to fully consider each situation with the client in mind, while simultaneously considering the values, ethical principles and standards of the counseling profession. Indeed, the *ACA Code of Ethics* specifically states that “ethical reasoning includes consideration of professional values, professional ethical principles and ethical standards.” By processing the therapeutic experience and the principles of our profession, counselors can clarify possibilities and choose an action that is consistent with our profession’s values.

To navigate fearful emotions, counselors must also understand the evolution of these feelings. Reflecting on their entry into the profession,

some counselors might recall having an unbounded sense of knowledge (even if time and experience prove otherwise). Meanwhile, others might have believed that they did not possess enough knowledge. Neither notion was entirely realistic. Counselors are trained to form a foundation of personal self-awareness, academic knowledge and professional skills while adhering to the philosophy of lifelong learning. They should also aspire to grow as practitioners even as they promote the growth of clients.

Beginning counselors sometimes forget to use their store of foundational knowledge and neglect to seek professional development. In doing so, they may develop an immense fear of making mistakes and grapple with applying an ethical decision-making process. Fear of making a mistake or receiving a negative evaluation from clients or supervisors may lead to indecisiveness, avoidance, immobility and rationalization.

Alternatively, counselors may strive for perfection, getting lost in robotic and rigid thinking while not fully attending to the client. Whatever the circumstance, counselors sometimes fail to take necessary ethical action. This experience can leave counselors feeling demoralized and fearful, regardless of whether their decisions were affirmed. In essence, counselors can become repeatedly controlled and paralyzed by these uncomfortable responses to clinical experiences. Instead of accepting these uncomfortable responses as normal parts of practice, they can become ruled by them. As a result, counselors may develop maladaptive patterns of approaching ethical decision-making procedures.

To disrupt these maladaptive patterns, counselors can access the foundation of training and reflective practice. Next, counselors who experience fearful responses can use ACT to experience, evaluate and accept a valued course of action.

ACT is also an easily remembered acronym that is pertinent to the decision-making process: *Accept* your reactions and be present, *choose* a valued direction and *take* action.

Accept, choose, take

When faced with a challenging situation, the first step is to *accept* it. In most cases, there is nothing that

counselors could have done to prevent the situation from happening. In addition, it is natural for counselors to have personal reactions — including thoughts, emotions, physiological responses or memories — when clients share their stories.

When these reactions arise, counselors should stay in the moment and be aware of the here and now. What is happening? What is the client sharing? How is the client sharing it? How are we responding to the client's story?

Remaining in the moment will allow counselors and clients to move forward in a meaningful way. No matter the experience, counselors can remain open to it rather than be confined by it. In this manner, they can accept their responses no matter how unpleasant the feelings of anxiety, fear or uncertainty may be. Counselors can also accept that they possess the foundation and resources to facilitate client growth in an ethical manner.

Rather than being constrained by indecisiveness or avoiding decision-making, counselors can ACT toward freedom from fear and assert the courage to step into the roles for which they were trained. Accessing courage through reflective practice will allow counselors to freely consider possible actions and direction.

In the second step of the model, it is important to *choose* a valued direction based on the counselor's experience. Choosing an appropriate ethical decision-making model will allow counselors to evaluate direction. The *ACA Code of Ethics* acknowledges that counselors may experience challenging and difficult-to-resolve ethical situations to which they must respond carefully by using an ethical decision-making process.

Applying an appropriate ethical decision-making model can move counselors to the final step of *taking action*. In doing so, counselors should accept the situation and commit to action, knowing that the appropriate steps have been considered. Hopefully, following these steps will promote ethically responsive actions as well as self-empowerment.

Consultation

In addition to reflecting on the therapeutic experience, counselors should remember to consider readily available resources. As counselors confront new

challenges, they should consider the values of the client and the counseling profession, pertinent legal and ethical standards, and the policies of the institutions in which they work. When experiencing doubt, counselors can also consult with fellow practitioners.

Consultation, as defined by the *ACA Code of Ethics*, is “a professional relationship that may include, but is not limited to, seeking advice, information and/or testimony.” The emphasis that the *ACA Code of Ethics* places on utilizing other resources, including fellow practitioners, for consultation is clear. In fact, the document includes the word *consultation* 19 times, underscoring its value in the reflective process.

Furthermore, Standard C.2.e. of the *ACA Code of Ethics* states that counselors “take reasonable steps to consult with other counselors, the ACA Ethics and Professional Standards Department, or related professionals when they have questions regarding their ethical obligations or professional practice.” Revisiting ethical codes alongside consultation will help counselors develop a plan and commit to actions that are consistent with intentions and goals. As counselors encounter fear, uncertainty or immobility, it can be helpful to consider consultation in conjunction with the aforementioned ACT constructs.

Repeatedly applying and practicing these reflective methods can help counselors develop a sense of self-efficacy and solidify their trust in their training and decision-making ability, which is essential in gaining therapeutic momentum. The notion of trust is vital to the counseling process. As the *ACA Code of Ethics* notes, “Trust is the cornerstone of the counseling relationship.”

The counselor is a part of that relationship. Therefore, trust in oneself can promote trust in the relationship. Additionally, the counselor can be empowered to act. Instead of acting like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights, counselors can reflect, consult and move gracefully forward to enhance client growth.

Conclusion

In sum, we hope that counselors understand the notion of fully reflecting on the therapeutic experience. We

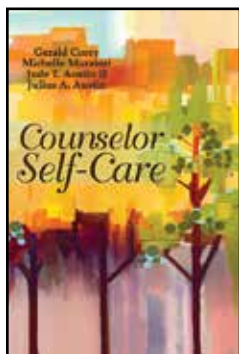
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also hope that counselors accept and honor their responses to the therapeutic experience even if these responses are sometimes uncomfortable. Responses such as fear, anxiety, uncertainty or immobility are normal parts of the human experience.

In addition, perfection is impossible to achieve. Striving for it only obstructs our freedom to act. Perfection should not be expected, either for our clients or for ourselves.

Counselors should understand and accept that reflective practitioners are allowed to adapt, change course and utilize resources. Indeed, they can consult with other practitioners while reflecting upon the *ACA Code of Ethics* as a valuable resource. We hope that counselors are able to apply training, consultation and reflective practice while pursuing lifelong learning in the process of navigating ethical decisions.

More importantly, counselors should always seek to enhance their professional development. In doing so, counselors can navigate feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty and immobility while embracing self-trust and acceptance of personal reflection.

We hope that counselors will consider these suggestions to develop courage and act with freedom. In fact, the next time counselors experience fight, flight or freeze, we dare them to ACT. ❖

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