

A Mental Health Counselor's Career Experience

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According to Erford (2018), pursuing a career in mental health counseling usually comes from a sincere desire to help others. However, it is imperative to understand the principles, the required accreditations, personal motivations, challenges, rewards, and realities involved in becoming a professional mental health counselor. The purpose of this interview is to gain insight and explore the career of mental health counseling in the specific area of interest to the student, in my case it is working with women. For this reason, I chose to interview Chastity Crespo, who has worked for approximately four years with the non-for-profit organization Rising Grounds, as an Economic Specialist and Resource Coordinator (with a limited permit to practice). Her specialization is in trauma among women which includes sexual abuse, intimate partner violence (IPV), and identity issues. As an economic empowerment specialist Chastity helps clients with resume writing, school applications, and overcoming obstacles that may arise. As a resource coordinator, she assists clients, and coworkers by connecting them to outside resources. In her position, she must advocate for her clients in dealing with the housing system and other public services. In situations where the client fears seeing a perpetrator or an order of protection is in place, she may accompany clients to court for support or make phone calls on their behalf.

Interview

Chastity's personal experiences with trauma and being, "the go-to person for many" who needed advice, made choosing a career in counseling a "no brainer" for her (C. Crespo, personal communication, February 6, 2021). Chastity shared that her graduate education brought her awareness of her wounds and required her to confront and work through her trauma but also allowed her to experience counseling from the client's perspective. Which, according to Erford (2018), is key for a counselor to be able to relate and "empathize with the client role" (p.173).

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The interview took place via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Normally, Chastity would work from her cubicle in an office located in East Harlem, but for now, she communicates with her clients via Zoom meetings and phone calls. In working with women that have suffered trauma, Chastity states that she does not have a preferred theory because it will depend on the individual's character and on what will be most useful to address the current situation. Chastity's personal theory is that "getting to the matters of the heart" and helping the client become aware of their thought process (instead of focusing on behavior), will lead to discovering root causes (C. Crespo, personal communication, February 6, 2021). Chastity does, however, find that cognitive behavioral therapy works best for her clients because trauma involves a lot of perception and taking control of negative thought patterns that are formed by what a person has been told by others. Yet, Chastity feels that applying empirically supported theories, therapy, and ethical principles, when working with the Hispanic, Black, and the lower socioeconomic class she serves, is not as effective as it appears to be. The reason for this she said was that these have been based on research performed with a primarily male white population and therefore, relatability is diminished when it comes to dealing with people of other cultures and genders. Her advice to me was to be as open as possible to relearning and adjusting in order to counsel in a way that best benefits the client or population. Chastity then emphasized the importance of being keenly aware of personal biases regarding sexuality, as to not bring them into the session. Regarding clients of the LGBT community, in her opinion Christians do not have to feel as if they cannot counsel them (or need to counsel them differently) because most of the client's needs are not sexually related. Another issue that presents itself is client relocation to another state. Because "the counseling profession currently does not have portability agreement for licensed professional counselors" (Erford, 2018, p.64), services must cease, and care transferred. This can

create a problem for the client due to the lack of availability of counselors in the area where the client moved and the client's hesitance to start over with a new counselor. Despite the difficulties and challenges in the transition from theory to practice, the most satisfying part of Chastity's work is the way clients are impacted by even the smallest amount of growth.

Discussion

Chastity admitted that her journey of becoming a counselor began with extensive internal work, self-care, and continual growth. I took this disclosure as an inadvertent piece of advice. This encouraged me because self-doubt can arise from thinking that due to personal shortcomings, I may not be apt to become a counselor. Yet, hearing Chastity's testimony showed me that if a person is willing to take the necessary steps for introspection it can be used for the benefit of the person and others. This was evident in Chastity's bright, candid, and inviting demeanor. She mirrored characteristics "such as being a vibrant, inspirational, charismatic, loving individual able to be present and available to clients", that are required in a good counselor (Erford, 2018, p.169).

Listening to how Chasity carried out her supportive duties with the women in practical ways, it became obvious that I underestimated how vital this is for a client to develop a sense of security that can enable them to act and improve their circumstances. Considering these things helped me see that a counselor's job may not be glamorous, simple, nor single-faceted but it is significant. I noticed that when a counselor works in an underserved population as Chasity does, the expectation that counselors serve people even when there is no significant financial gain involved (Erford, 2018), is a sacrifice that I will be willing to make. However, a concern for me is that working with women with trauma can put a counselor at risk because these cases can

often involve IPV, child custody, and various mental disorders involved (Erford, 2018). But the more I thought about it, I concluded that these are life situations that are unavoidable.

Another thing that worried me was perhaps not being able to effectively apply theories and therapies to women within the Hispanic faith-based community because they come from different cultural backgrounds, levels of education, and social class. Needing to experiment with various theories before I figure out what works best makes me a bit uncomfortable, but I see that there is no other way. This highlighted the importance of being able to integrate multicultural techniques. I was born and raised in the United States in a strong matriarchal family. I can see that this is an area that will require a lot of intentionality in dealing with my cultural and gender biases. In addition, I will need to learn how to incorporate therapeutic techniques in a way that will not conflict with the client's religious beliefs.

Interviewing Chastity gave me clarity and showed me the areas I need to work on if I want to counsel Hispanic women in the church. First, I need to be willing to continually evaluate and address my mental health needs. Second, I need to obtain training in crisis intervention and prevention. Thirdly, I will have to work hard on developing good multicultural skills. Lastly, it will be necessary for me to develop the wisdom to integrate faith into therapeutic treatment. The interview allowed me to analyze the efforts and sacrifices that will be required of me if I want to serve this population. I can see that although mental health counseling students must participate in many hours of internship to prepare them, there is a vast and lengthy transition between theory and practice. The counselor's ability to apply theories and techniques will continue to develop throughout their career. There is no right or wrong answer. Only the best effort put forward in humility and love. Therefore, no one is ever ready to be a counselor, but rather serving the client assists the counselor in becoming a better professional.

References

Erford, B. T. (2018). *Orientation to the counseling profession: Advocacy, ethics, and essential professional foundations* (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson.