

Counselor Identity

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Introduction

“Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth” (ali). I honestly believed I was called to serve and for a while I struggled with the idea as I did not know in what capacity. It was not until I arrive in the U.S. and began my collegiate studies, and then gaining the experiences that I knew exactly what I was called to do. Growing up my country Jamaica; a person who was unkempt, homeless, and behaved abnormally was considered “mad”. This was a stereotypical view of the human condition applied with a broad stroke to many people. It never made me comfortable and, in some ways made me feel that, as a human I could be cast off and labeled too.

Although the lines around the world are drawn in a certain way by the margin of the people who exist in a particular community, the name that can often be associated with certain aspects of the most demonized is “mental illness”. Unfortunately, a lot of people across the globe, in both developed and underdeveloped societies still have no understanding of what mental illness is or how it truly impacts a person’s life.

Paired with my experience working with the mental health population, I have no doubt in my mind that I will be equipped with the necessary tools needed to help me help my clients lead sustainable and meaningful lives.

The role/job professional helper is to provide a safe haven for your clients, where they feel accommodated, accepted, know that they are being heard, and assured without feeling judged. Empathy and transparency also play a huge role when dealing with your clients along with having an open mind and being ready for anything. The desire to help and serve others has always been something I aspire to do. It is not an easy feat when the table is flipped, and you require help, only to find out the ones who assure you that they will always be there when you need a helping hand are nowhere to be found. I can personally attest to this. Being in an environment where I can make a difference has ignited a spark in me to serve others in whatever capacity I can.

I found a new sense of purpose and hope when I started working with the mental health population. I worked in a MICA (Mental Illness Chemical Abuse) women's shelter, a three-dimensional residential facility (the individuals had a disability, mental illnesses, and incarcerated records), before transitioning to Administration of Children Services (ACS) where I served incarcerated juveniles and now family services. This was an eye-opener for me as it became clearer in the instance that mental illness is not a myth or stigma, but a reality. I was thrust into an environment with a rich diversity of mental illness along with an abundance of human frailty issues and I could no longer walk away. I had to make every effort to work with people where they were and with a notion of what they were dealing with was beyond my immediate grasp.

Based on my beliefs and experiences as a counselor you need to be able to assess the situation. In so doing, you are piecing the necessary information together in order to point out, implement safety interventions, and make informed decisions concerning your clients. Actively Listening to your client's verbal and nonverbal needs is vital in counseling sessions. Sometimes a client

might be saying one thing and their body language is saying something else. In addition to identifying their tone used, or them avoiding eye contact and even their very posture. Also, being able to evaluate your clients in order to formulate a service plan designed specifically to meet their needs.

Nevertheless, as a counselor we are to be mindful of how we impose our beliefs and ideas on our clients. They have their rights and as such they can chose whether they want to accept what we are telling them or not. Another belief that as a counselor we should not do during a counseling session is interrupt or cut the clients off while they are talking. This will cause them to shut down and more than likely stop coming to therapy sessions. It is very important also that as a counselor we listen not to speak but to actually, listen because in so doing you will be able to hear the unspoken words.

In my life, I have encountered mental illness in many forms and have been guilty of wanting to avoid circumstances that would be challenging to me in living my daily life. Despite that, I always say I would one day like to open my own non-profit organization to help at risk youth and teenage mothers. So, it was not by chance that once I started working in New York City juvenile system, and having a connection with some of our young men who are considered outcast by society because of their wrongdoings, I knew the population I would really find success working with. At first, it was not easy gaining their trust given the hand they were dealt. However, walking on the hall daily making them feel as if they are human, helping them with their school assignments, speaking life into them, they start trusting me with snippets of their lives and eventually I was able to form a bond with them.

On the other hand, based on my personal experience working with clients that not only have mental illnesses but also a history of drug and/or alcohol abuse can be difficult. As such clients

who are non-compliant are usually the hardest for me as they are known to resist treatment or self-sabotaging. These clients show up on a regular basis and actively do the work but once the session is over, they resort to their dysfunctional habits by not applying the principles or utilizing the tools given to help them during the counseling sessions. They also have a tendency of avoiding topics that will make them vulnerable. Their defense mechanism is not easily extinguished and as such they have the proclivity to rationalize everything and change the topics instead of discussing it.

This can be frustrating and burdensome in that I am left feeling responsible for the client's lack of progress. This more than likely may come across as a push-and-pull situation that yields no results along with whatever opposite force is being expelled on the client, which may very well fuel resistance leaving me feeling drained. However, I have discovered in order to yield the needed result(s) I should not push the issue at hand, but to take a step back and assess the situation in order to bring about a solution. This will help both the client and me, to come to an agreement and be on mutual terms. I also have to remember not to be judgmental and always treat people the way I want to be treated regardless of who they are, their present circumstance, or their mental state.

Working as a counselor, is not just about helping the clients with their issues by talking or listening to them but to ensure that the attire is also appropriate. Different things are triggers for different people, and as such the way we carry ourselves speak volume. I truly believe that it depends on the population we are working with or the settings of the session. For example, if the population you serve are children, and the settings is play therapy, then the counselor's attire should be kids friendly or business casual but comfortable. If your clients are professionals, then

as such, calm, serene, neutral color professional or business casual attire would be the appropriate choice of attire for the counselor.

Frolic and detour is a phrase describing actions taken by an employee that fall in varying degrees outside of the scope of employment (Team, 2020). In other words, helping professionals deviates from the “on the clock” work setting but still maintain some or no type of professionalism while wearing the “civilian hat”. Most jobs have mode of conduct and whether you or on the clock or not carrying yourself accordingly should still be practiced. Being outside in the community while wearing the “civilian hat” you are still expected to carry yourself in a professional manner as you never know who is watching. Therefore, there are some behaviors that should be avoided. Many helping professionals are part of the social media world and even though nobody can tell you what to post, as helping professionals you are under the scope and what you put out there can come back and haunt you.

Working professionals should refrain from making sexual advances in the community of fellow employees especially if they have expressed that they are not interested while “on the clock”. Sexual harassment has serious consequences in and out of the workplace. An employee guilty of sexual harassment can be disciplined as a result of their actions. Engaging in smoking or drinking on the job is prohibited but permitted in your personal time. Hence, you can indulge as you feel but I do not believe it should be to the point where it starts affecting your work.

Helping professionals are faces of their organization and should not engage in criminal activities. Even though it might not bring shame to the place of employment, but on you, it is still important to try and stay away from getting in trouble with the law. If found guilty, your chances of working with some agency can be limited. It is our duty to ensure that no matter if we are in an

“on the clock” setting or have our “civilian hat” on to hold ourselves accountable not just to the standard others have of us, but to our very own.

Additionally, some people live by work hard and play even harder so when they are outside having fun there should not be any limitations on what they chose to do. Though his may be true, working in certain professional field, you are looked at differently if you are in leadership positions and people look up to you.

Self-care is super important in the lives of a helping professional and I can personally attest to this. During Covid-19, when the world was shut down and most people were home, I still had to go to work. Some days were easier than some as the fast-paced world some of us have grown accustomed to slowly came to a standstill. The things or people we took for granted we suddenly, wish we did not. In the blink of an eye the familiar became the unfamiliar.

I was sometimes working sixteen or more hours while in school and trying to stay safe not so much for me, but my family who was home and I did not want to get sick. The long hours took a toll on me along with assuring the clients that we are going to get through it together. The burnout eventually started taking over but I thank God for my Facility manager and the team I worked with as we started encouraging each other to take a day off to regroup. This helped a whole lot.

I work full-time in a very demanding field with a high turnover rate and as such our caseload can be very high. Truth be told if you are not careful, you can get burnout in a split second. Having a good support system is very vital in helping you to understand your limitations and knowing when to let go. There is huge difference between self-maintenance and self-care. Getting our hair

done, a manicure or massage are self-maintenance. However, when you practice self-care, you are putting you first.

This is essential in our daily lives, and one should not feel guilty doing something nice for oneself. Some work environments are stressful in and out of itself, leaving you feel drained and unaccomplished. This should not be this way as it can affect you mentally and physically. The sad reality is once we have the needed experience and requirements, we can get any job we want. The same it is with a job replacing us the minute we are not performing up to par and instead of recognizing it for what it is, they let you go.

The end goal is not to work harder but to work smarter. I have a to do book that I write down my work plan for each day in. Nevertheless, we have to also keep in the back of our minds that plans get interrupted as things have a way of changing but we should not allow it to throw us off course. Instead, we should just readjust the sails, and keep working through one task at a time. Learn to accept that not everything will get done in one day and just keep pressing on.

As I am getting ready to enter the helping profession of Mental Health I plan to invest as much time in me as I possible can. I believe in tapping out in that when it gets too overwhelming, I take a step back and allow someone else to take the lead while I regroup. I am learning the art of compartmentalizing and to leave work at work. I heard someone say, “even the therapist needs a therapist” and I have come to realize it is so very true. Finding someone trained to talk to outside of our usual circle can help you unpack a lot of things.

Covid-19 has taught me the importance of taking mental health days, which is also considered self-care. Taking the time-out to relax, have a lazy day and spending time with yourself, loved ones and close friends can help us perform better at our jobs, stay focus, and sleep better. Once

you are in tune with what you really need and start taking the time out to find them, things start changing. It is all a process and there is no quick fix to it, just as long as we take the time out to do one thing at a time, ask for help and support from our peers or leadership team when needed and understand that no man is an island, we can do great exploits and perform better at our assigned tasks.

As part of my self-care routine, I started journaling, doing little things I always wanted to do but because I was so wrapped up in my work, I never took the chance to. I am learning to spend a lot more, quiet time with God. Allowing Him to lead and direct my path and to trust him with the things I cannot control or understand. Self-care is developing routines that effect positive change within and cultivating lasting impacts.

References:

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