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An Ethical Decision Making Model for Crisis Counselors

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Disaster mental health (DMH) needs to take into account the scope and complexity of crisis counseling service delivery from the perspective of ethical decision making in the wake of a disaster (ranging from natural to human generated catastrophes). Crisis counseling service delivery, because of its demanding nature and unique challenges, is different from any other kind of counseling, i.e., away from a familiar treatment setting, etc. The demanding nature of crisis counseling, carried out during a disaster or post-disaster, demands that crisis counselors have a clear sense of the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2005) and routinely practice ethical decision making. The latter, ethical decision making, should include steps and considerations that help the crisis counselor respond ethically to the needs of disaster survivors of all ages (including first responders such as police, fire fighters, etc.) who are seen locally, nationally, and internationally.

Moreover, when doing crisis counseling, an eco systemic perspective (rooted in Bronfenbrenner's work [1987]) should be used if crisis counseling services are to be accepted and efficacious. The taxonomy consists of a hierarchy of four systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. Using an eco systemic perspective involves: (a) the interrelatedness of a person, family, and/or community members who have experienced a disaster, (b) the environment where the disaster occurred, (c) the environment where the recovery from the disaster occurred, and (d) developmental tasks that must occur. Using an eco systemic perspective provides a complex understanding of the disaster survivor's differences, needs, and strengths.

When engaging in ethical decision making, aggregate groups, (e.g., families, schools, communities, etc.) and the unique system-level needs of those affected by the disaster should be considered. The community's pre-existing conditions, resources (some communities are more resource rich than others), and history (e.g., mental health and medical services, economics, war/civil war, etc.), the duration (lasting from minutes to

hours, days, weeks, months to years), magnitude and level of distraction (injuries, losses of lives, destruction of property and community) of the disaster on individuals, families, and the community (including local first responders) must also be taken into account when making ethical decisions.

The crisis counselor can make ethical decisions using the ACA Code of Ethics, however the Code in and of itself cannot guarantee that a crisis counselor will behave ethically. Moreover, Code cannot resolve all ethical issues or capture the richness and complexity involved in crisis counselors striving to make responsible choices in a disaster situation. Rather, the ACA Code of Ethics sets forth ethical principles and ethical standards to which crisis counselors aspire and by which their crisis counseling can be judged. Crisis counselors' behavior must be based on an ethical decision making process using the ACA Code of Ethics.

Ethical decision making for crisis counselors consists of ten steps: (1) identify the ethical concern within the context of the disaster, (2) consider personal (crisis counselor's) beliefs and values, skills and knowledge, (3) identify the code(s) of ethics involved, (4) determine possible ethical traps, (5) frame a preliminary response, (6) consider the consequences, (7) prepare an ethical resolution, (8) get feedback/consultation from other crisis counselors, (9) take action, and (10) review the outcome.

Step 1- Identify the ethical concern within the context of the disaster. During this step, the crisis counselor identifies an ethical dilemma that s/he is faced with, which might be unique to the disaster event (e.g., location, duration, magnitude). It also would involve providing crisis counseling in this or another country, with diverse cultures, religious/spiritual values, etc.

Example: A crisis counselor was deployed to Russia with two other crisis counselors from another relief organization, subsequent to a terrorist attack and the death of many Russian civilians (children, women, and men). She observed one of the other crisis counselors requesting that the survivors who received crisis counseling make themselves available to tell their story on video. According to this crisis counselor, the video tapes would be used by the relief organization to encourage donations for the people affected by the terrorist attack. One of the local women started crying and asked not to be video taped when telling her story.

Step 2- Consider personal (the crisis counselor's) self, beliefs and values, skills and knowledge. During this stage, the crisis counselor needs to assess the (a) *self* - does s/he have the ability to deal with his/her own stress and internal conflict as well as his/her emotions so that s/he can be calm, and is able to focus and be action oriented, (b) *beliefs and values* - about him/herself, others, the world and religious/spiritual values to see that they do not interfere with their ethical decision making process, and (c) *skills and knowledge* - having the crisis counseling and crisis management skills needed to meet the needs of the disaster affected individual, family and community.

Example: The crisis counselor, being aware of the importance of relief organizations procuring donations, felt upset that these survivors were being used to get funding, rather than to meet their needs.

Step 3- Identify the code(s) of ethics involved. During this step, the crisis counselor identifies the code(s) that applies to this ethical dilemma. Familiarity with the ACA Code of Ethics is important in this step. If a copy of the ACA Code of Ethics is available, it might also serve as an additional resource to identify the codes impacted.

Example: the ACA Code of Ethics clearly states: A.1.a. Primary Responsibility – The primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the dignity and to promote the welfare of clients (APA, p. 3). B.1.b. Respect for Privacy – Counselors respect client rights to privacy. Counselors solicit private information from clients only when it is beneficial to the counseling process (ACA, p. 7). C.1 Knowledge of Standards – Counselors have a responsibility to read, understand, and follow the ACA Code of Ethics and adhere to applicable laws and regulations (ACA, p. 9). C.3.b. Testimonial – Counselors who use testimonials do not solicit them from current clients nor former clients nor any other persons who may be vulnerable to undue influence (ACA, p. 10).

Step 4- Determine possible ethical traps. There are several traps that crisis counselors might struggle with and need to assess, to assure that they are not interfering with ethical decision making: (a) *the common objectivity trap* - is s/he (the crisis counselor) over-identifying or over-invested with the trauma affected person, family, community?; (b) *the value trap* - the crisis counselor's personal values about who should be served (e.g., children over adults, young adults over the elderly, etc.) how to provide services (using the same services regardless of the needs of the disaster affected individual, family , community); (c) *the circumstantialities trap* - the belief that crisis counseling is a unique circumstance (e.g., magnitude of the disaster, lack of resources and support services, functioning in another country, etc.) and traditional values and practices do not need to be followed; (d) *the traditional trap* - historically s/he (the crisis counselor) has not done it that way before (e.g., in previous disasters, or in the office, etc.); (e) *the role trap* - functioning outside their role as crisis counselor (e.g. I know how to do Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing [EMDR], so I can do more than crisis counseling here, etc.) and beyond their skill level (e.g., I have never been trained in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing [CISD], but I have read about it, and I can learn as I go along, etc.); (f) *the "that's what we do in the USA" trap* - providing services using American frame of reference rather than looking at the cultural, historical, ecological, etc., setting; (g) *the who will benefit trap* - limiting the services to those that the crisis counselor perceives as benefitting and being deserving of crisis counseling, such as women and children versus soldiers; and (h) *the vicarious trauma trap* - the perception that what s/he (crisis counselor) is doing is not making any difference, is not helpful.

Example: *The crisis counselor assessed the different ethical traps and decided that providing crisis counseling in Russia does not justify video taping survivors who did not want to be video taped, and justifying such behavior with public donations allowing additional teams to be deployed in the future.*

Step 5- Frame a preliminary response. After having identified the crisis counselor's personal self, skills, and knowledge as well as personal beliefs and values, in addition to having identified the ACA Code(s) of Ethics that apply to the ethical traps, s/he (crisis counselor) will develop a preliminary response for how to deal with the situation.

Example: *The crisis counselor believed that it was her responsibility to talk with the other two crisis counselors and remind them that their expectations of survivors did not follow the ACA Code of Ethics.*

Step 6- Consider the consequences. During this step, the crisis counselor is to assess, using an eco-systemic view, what consequences the preliminary ethical decision might have, i.e., if there are any possible adverse reactions for the individual, family, and/or community affected by the disaster. Focus also needs to be upon determining what consequences the preliminary ethical decision might put upon the crisis counselor and/or other crisis counselors and/or first responders.

Example: *The crisis counselor realized that addressing her ethical concerns with the other two crisis counselors might result in difficulty in working together and in delivering quality services.*

Step 7- Prepare an ethical resolution. After all consequences have been assessed and the crisis counselor has determined that the consequences from his/her ethical decision making are in the best interest of the disaster affected individual, family, and community, as well as within the skill and knowledge level of the crisis counselor and appropriate for the disaster affected country, s/he prepares the ethical resolution.

Example: *The crisis counselor concluded that her decision to talk with the other two crisis counselors was in the best interest of the terrorist affected Russian survivors.*

Step 8- Get feedback/consultation from other crisis counselor(s). Following the ethical resolution, the crisis counselor communicates his/her decision to his/her fellow crisis counselors and if appropriate, consults with local agencies/organizations that they are in partnership with. In addition, they might also choose to consult with the relief organization that deployed them to the disaster.

Example: *Since no other crisis counselors were accessible to the crisis counselor other than the two who had engaged in the video taping for donation practice, she contacted her own relief organization, who agreed with her, and voiced concerns about the situation.*

Step 9- Take action. If no concerns were raised after the crisis counselor's consultation, s/he will act according to the ethical decision made.

Example: The crisis counselor requested a meeting with the other two crisis counselors, and reported her concern and the consultation she had engaged in before setting up this meeting. The crisis counselors' response was to be open to the feedback, thanked the crisis counselor for reminding them of their code of ethics and then said: "We didn't know, and we never would have done this in the USA, but it seems different in Russia, especially, since Russia has no established code of ethics for counselors/mental health professionals."

Step 10- Review the outcome. After the crisis counselor has acted on the ethical decision, s/he needs to assess/review the outcome of the decision, with a desire to learn from the process and improve future ethical decision making. This process also includes getting feedback or reviewing the impact of the ethical decision on the disaster affected individuals, families and the community. Information should also be gathered from the local agencies/organizations they are in partnership with, as well as their relief organization. This review will be important to the crisis counselor, as well as other crisis counselors, allowing for lessons learned at the disaster site, and can be something passed on to other crisis counselors at their own and other relief organizations.

Example: The crisis counselor reported feeling good about the other two crisis counselors' responses to her feedback. She was surprised that they chose not to use their ACA Code of Ethics to guide them in their work as crisis counselors in another country. She did report that she felt good about the process and outcome and will address ethical concerns in the future using the ethical decision making model.

Summary

It is important to remember that crisis counselors should be guided by the ACA Code of Ethics as they respond to disasters in and outside the United States, and often faced with complex and unique ethical challenges. However, the ACA Code of Ethics cannot guarantee ethical behavior. Moreover, the Code cannot resolve all ethical issues encountered by the crisis counselor or capture the complexity involved in doing crisis counseling during and immediately after disasters while striving to make responsible choices. Rather, the ACA Code of Ethics sets forth ethical principles, standards and values to which crisis counselors aspire and by which their actions while doing crisis counseling can be judged, making an ethical decision model for crisis counselors essential.

Conclusion

This ten step model is expected to be of help to crisis counselors as they work during and after disaster situations. This is not an easy task, as disasters are characterized by rapid change and a high degree of uncertainty. The implications of crisis counselors using this ethical decision making model is a standard of conduct and service delivery which is in the best interest of the disaster affected individuals, families and communities on the local, national and international level.

References

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