

Ethical Pitfalls: Avoiding Professional Hazards, Cross Country Education Workshop

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Practitioners face ethical questions and dilemmas not only daily in their practices but also outside their practices. Ethics follow us everywhere! Steve Polovick, MS, LSW (workshop presenter) provided questions and case examples that are sure to bring forth a lot of discussion and feedback. I've included some of the questions and answers provided in the workshop:

- 1) **Are ethic violations are also legal violations?** Not necessarily, although one can still lose his/her license over an ethics violation(s).
- 2) **If my license is as a drug and alcohol counselor, is it ethical to advertise myself in a marketing letter that I do marriage and family counseling, mental health counseling, anger management, etc.?** No, because your license says your scope of practice is mainly as a drug and alcohol counselor. It may be that dealing with some of these issues are part/parcel in dealing with addiction, but to advertise oneself outside one's scope of practice is unethical.
- 3) **If I have a PhD in Exercise Physiology (like Dr. Laura) can I advertise myself as a PhD?** Since mental health counseling is licensed, if Dr. Laura only advertised as PhD it would give clients the false impression that her PhD was in Counseling, thus she can market herself as PhD, LIMHP which is then NOT false advertising. But just putting the PhD alone would or could be misleading to clients seeking out services.
- 4) **Is it okay to use whiteout when writing progress notes?** No, it is not okay to do so; it can imply trying to hide original wording on a legal document (all charting is legal document).
- 5) **Is it okay to dispose of clients' old charts in a cardboard box without shredding?** No, record must be destroyed in the most client-protected way, i.e., shredding the documents.
- 6) **Will I always know if a complaint has been filed against me?** No, it will be on record with the Board but will not be a public record. First, complaints are evaluated by the Board to see if there's enough evidence to justify an investigation. Only if the complaint is investigated will there be a public record of the outcome. The presenter stated out of 200 complaints, maybe only 100 will have enough evidence to investigate, and only a small percentage of those go on to suspension, license revocation, etc.
- 7) **If I'm investigated, should I always hire an attorney?** Not necessarily--as a simple explanation on your part may be all that is needed; however, if you are guilty, or if you want legal advice by all means hire an attorney.
- 8) **Is it ethical to write a letter to the editor of my local newspaper with my strong opinions about a values issue (e.g., abortion, gay and lesbian issues, immigration, etc.) and sign my name with my license (John Doe, LIMHP)?** No, it's not ethical. You could sign your name with your education letters (John Doe, MS) because you "own" your education letters, but your licensure (LIMHP, for example) is "owned" by the Licensing Board and is, in effect, "rented" to you. When you sign LIMHP in letter to editor you may be assumed as speaking for all LIMHPs. The presenter stated that we might not agree with the Board's stance on this, but it is the Board's standing. Also, if John Doe said he was absolutely for (or against) a values issue and one of his clients read his letter to editor, it "harms" this client or potential clients who see that counselors are/could be biased.

These are just a few of the many topics raised in the material. Stay tuned for Part Two!