

[Reaction Paper]

**The Ethical Practice of Counseling:
What Clients in Asia Ought to Know About Counseling**

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Counseling is becoming a visible profession in Asia. This article serves to inform Asians about (1) what counseling is; (2) who counselors are; (3) what to expect in counseling; and (4) how to know if counselors are ethical and professional.

What Is Counseling?

Counseling is a profession in which a trained counselor helps other people articulate their feelings, understand themselves, and change their behaviors. People come to counseling when they feel depressed, anxious, confused, pressured, or lonely, which are common experiences when people confront normal developmental concerns, such as making career decisions, dealing with life transitions, resolving marital or family conflicts, developing relationships, and coping with losses in life. Seeking counseling does not mean that something is wrong with you — it is a way to tell yourself that you are not alone, and that you do not have to deal with the problems by yourself only.

Counseling is a professional career for those who provide services to you. In other words, professional counseling is not amateur practice.

During the helping process, counselors gather various types of information and help you understand yourself. Your honest discussions of your feelings and experiences enable counselors to diagnose why you feel the way you do, and to suggest and provide ways for change. The assessment, diagnosis, and treatment process reflect years of professional training and experiences. Therefore, you should expect to pay a fee for counseling services.

Who Are Counselors?

Counselors assume different professional titles. Professional counselors typically attained at the minimum a master's degree in one of the following fields: counseling psychology, clinical psychology, mental health counseling, school counseling, social work, or marriage and family therapy. It is not uncommon for counselors to have a doctorate. The rigor of the counselors' training can be reflected from whether their professional preparation meets certain required standards and qualifies them for licensure or certification. Along with academic studies, a rigorous counseling preparation program should also provide students with at least one year (a set number of hours of experiences that need to be accumulated) of practicum training, in which students gained practical clinical experiences under supervision in various counseling settings. You may ask about your counselor's professional training, qualifications, as well as the licensure or certification status before or during the initial session.

Counselors represent various specialty areas, theoretical orientations, and training emphases. For example, counseling psychologists tend to view counseling concerns as normal developmental barriers that people confront; clinical psychologists tend to approach problems as reflecting certain type or degree of psychopathology; marriage and family therapists tend to understand people in the context of family systems. Regardless of their training emphasis, there is a core set of knowledge and skill

competencies that should be expected from professional counselors, including:

1. Knowledge of how they are different from other counseling specialties, their roles and functions when working with you, and the profession's ethical standards;
2. Skills and techniques in cultivating a trusting relationship with you;
3. Ability to help you explore and understand how your personality, lifestyle, and preference have developed;
4. Competencies in the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of psychopathology, problems of maladjustment, and dysfunctional behaviors;
5. Awareness of how counselors' own personal and cultural biases and needs may have affected their helping you;
6. Research-based training of the application, interpretation, and limitations of psychological and educational tests;
7. Information about other professionals or agencies from whom you can seek additional help.

What Should I Expect From Counseling?

Counseling involves a partnership between the counselor and the client. It calls for a relationship that is (1) collaborative — counselors work with you together to understand and deal with your concerns; and (2) confidential — counselors are obliged not to disclose you and your counseling issues outside the sessions. In the event that you indicate an intent to harm yourself (e.g., being suicidal) or other people (e.g., being abusive to other people), counselors will need to inform other people. This breach of confidentiality, however, is for your benefit. In some occasions, the counselor may offer some direct guidance; for example, educating you about when to leave and where to go when you are in physically abusive situations. At other times, counselors may assist you to make your own decisions; for example, deciding whether you want

to leave a physically abusive partner. While counselors respect your autonomy to make decisions for yourself, counselors who understand Asian cultural values should enable you to consider the impact of your decisions on your relationships, and to develop strategies to seek compromise. There is no set amount of time for “successful” counseling. The length of time depends on such factors as the nature of your concerns, your readiness to explore more about yourself, and the severity and chronicity of the problem.

How Do I Know If My Counselor Is Professional and Ethical?

Counseling is an ethical practice. Thus, counselor behaviors are governed by ethical standards of their profession. In general, ethical standards reflect six basic principles:

1. Do only what is good (e.g., counselors refer a suicidal case for medical treatment);
2. Cause no harm (e.g., counselors do not engage in sexual intimacy with clients);
3. Respect and promote people’s right to choose and act on their own (e.g., therapists do not force clients to conform to therapists’ suggestions);
4. Treat all people the same and do not discriminate (e.g., counselors provide counseling services regardless of the client’s gender or ethnic background);
5. Honor promises and commitment (e.g., counselors protect the client’s confidentiality as promised);
6. Be truthful (e.g., counselors being honest when reporting their training background and experiences).

Ethical standards have been developed by the professional counseling associations in various Asian countries or regions, including Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. These ethical standards are guidelines by

which counselors have to abide. Counselors who violate these standards could be reprimanded by law. For example, all codes of ethics explicitly state that sexual relationships between counselors and clients are prohibited. Counselors who publish clients' confidential information for personal profit and without securing client permission is also an ethical violation. Ethical standards and their legal reinforcement, therefore, are necessary to protect you from being exploited and to guarantee that the best services be provided in your best interest.

Most ethical standards advise counselors not to engage in multiple/dual relationships with clients. In other words, counselors have an ethical obligation to avoid providing counseling to family, friends, and people they know. In the event that you only trust and share your problems with your friend, who happens to be a professional counselor, your friend may respond to your request for counseling. However, you need to be prepared for several possible consequences: (1) your counselor-friend may try to refer you to another trusted counselor, so that he or she can remain more as a friend; or (2) your counselor-friend may distance himself or herself from you as a friend if counseling continues, so that he or she can be your professional counselor. Multiple/dual relationships potentially impair counselors' objectivity. It is likely that what you disclose and discuss in counseling involves people whom you and your counselor know. Since your counselor has an ethical obligation to protect you and your confidentiality, multiple/dual relationships may cause confusion and awkward feelings between counselors and clients, especially in social situations when your mutual friends or family relatives are also present. Therefore, your friend may show some concerns about your problem, and refer you to another counselor while protecting the confidentiality of your request and initial consultation. Due to the possible negative effects of multiple/dual relationships on your friendship, do not feel that your counselor-friend is not caring for you, and try to consider his or her referral suggestion.

All ethical standards explicitly state that it is unethical and, in many instances, illegal for counselors to have sexual relationships with their clients. The trust and bonding developed in the counseling relationship often put clients in an emotional state that could be exploited by unethical counselors. Therefore, always ask yourself if any physical contact initiated by the counselor is appropriate. Sexual behaviors refer not only to sexual intercourse, but inappropriate touching, hugging, caressing, and suggestive language of a sexual nature. Clients often feel confused and ashamed when counselors engage in these behaviors. Therefore, use your initial reactions and intuitions to protect yourself. You are encouraged to contact local professional counseling association to seek consultation and advice when you feel that your counselor has taken advantage of the relationship to make sexual advances.

For more information about the status of ethical standards in various Asian countries, please refer to the discussions by Chen (2003; Taiwan), Chong and Ow (2003; Singapore), Gong (2003; Korea), Leung, Leung, and Chan (2003; counseling teachers in Hong Kong secondary schools), and Mok (2003; when counselor and client have more than one type of relationships). The *Code of Conduct* (in English) of the Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association is available at the end of this Special Issue of *Asian Journal of Counselling*; it can also be accessed via the Association's Website (<http://www.hkpca.org.hk/conduct/codeofconduct.htm>).

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亞洲輔導專業道德守則的實踐：亞洲地區接受輔導者須知

在亞洲，輔導專業愈來愈受重視。本文嘗試幫助亞洲地區接受輔導的人士了解：（1）甚麼是心理輔導；（2）誰人有資格稱為專業輔導員；（3）對輔導應有甚麼合理的期望；及（4）專業輔導員應有那些道德操守。