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Counseling and COVID-19: Fostering Pragmatic Change

Life as we knew it changed, both professionally and personally, once news broke that a novel coronavirus was spreading globally at a concerning rate. For individuals in need of or receiving mental health services, necessary migratory measures further distanced them from receiving treatment. As a profession, we now experience a growing mental health crisis in the aftermath of the pandemic that has also illuminated vulnerabilities and facets of our professional and educational landscape that require intervention by regulatory bodies and associated governing entities. As a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the counseling profession has experienced challenges that necessitate strategic, systemic changes to ensure safe, ethical, and culturally competent delivery of services, supervision, and counselor education. While the fullness of the pandemic's longstanding impact on the counseling profession remains unknown, the immediate effects provide clear examples of learning and professional growth opportunities.

Opportunities for Learning

The emergency declaration enacted in early 2020 allows for a continuum of care through distance counseling or telemental health ("H.R.748 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): CARES Act", 2020) ("Social Security Act", 2020). However, counselors struggle to render services to clients with little guidance. According to a new World Health Organization survey of 130 countries, the difficulties are globally applicable. 93% of countries surveyed have experienced a devastating disruption in critical mental health services due to the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Additionally, preliminary data findings support the likelihood of an exponential increase in the need for pandemic-related mental health services (Lewis, 2020). While not mutually exclusive to the COVID-19 pandemic, students, clinicians, and counselor educators are at significantly heightened risk for burnout (BO), compassion fatigue (CF), and secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Wilson, 2020). The compilation of abrupt change, existing

occupational hazards, and lack of training in distance learning, supervision, and training in telemental health delivery has potentially detrimental implications for the mental health field.

The pandemic's immediate impact has emblazoned the importance of shared goals and objectives by Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) and The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Both CSI and CACREP demonstrate dedication to developing standards and professional excellence to promote the ethical, responsible delivery of services within the counseling profession (CACREP, 2015; Chi Sigma Iota Academy of Leaders, 1999). Ensuring the public's interest and safety necessitates assisting the profession in thriving by learning from the challenging experiences faced during the pandemic.

Counselor Education

The consequential impact of the pandemic is observable throughout all facets of the profession, including counselor education. As a result, CACREP Policies and Standards must adapt to incorporate modifications that reflect training programs' emergent needs. While continuing education offerings help clinicians gain insight into the fundamentals of telemental health, there is a demonstrable lack of competency in delivering telemental health services (Enos, 2020). CACREP can address this need by incorporating the modality as a part of the standardized counseling curriculum. In doing so, the core curricular of Professional Counseling Orientation and Ethical Practice should place additional emphasis on both The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) and The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act.

The Social and Cultural Diversity Core Curricular must also incorporate modifications to reflect recent developments and health disparities better. Counselors require additional insight into the unique psychosocial needs of Asian, African American, and Hispanic populations. Improvement through cultural and ethnic terminology would work towards addressing and preventing implicit racism or xenophobia. Finally, the incorporation of contingency management subjects (e.g., crisis counseling, counselor wellness) would enrich the profession by better preparing counselors for future crises and ensuring excellence (Wilson, 2020).

Supervision

The foundation of the supervisor/supervisee relationship is one of support and candidacy. Supervisors must be trauma-informed and vigilant regarding the wellbeing of their supervisees. Guidance and training in both hybrid and online modalities must now become a priority for supervisor education. In doing so, supervisors and supervisees can mitigate current and future health risks while avoiding potential lapse in supervision. Additionally, supervisees located in rural communities will likely increase compliance

with greater access to supervisors.

Counselors

Counselors are facing a variety of obstacles as a result of the pandemic. An increased caseload, technological barriers, lack of personal space, uncertainty surrounding future third-party payer coverage, and blurring professional boundaries are notable examples expressed by counselors across the nation (Enos, 2020; Wilson, 2020). Organizations such as CSI and CACREP are in a pivotal position to promote advocacy, personal wellness, and a greater sense of unity within the professional community by further developing standardized pandemic-related guidelines, emergency management resources, and risk assessment, and operations.

Improving Face to Face, Hybrid, and Telemental Health Delivery

As garnered from the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring quality services requires preventing the disruption of services. The traditional approach to counseling, typically provided in clinics, communities, hospitals, institutions, private practices, and schools, will remain an essential mainstay for the profession. However, the profession must stay prudent regarding the development of contingency planning through technological means. Since the inception of smartphones and mobile devices, there has been a steady increase in mobile health (mHealth) applications and telemedicine platforms (Lane, 2020). There is a definite need for professional entities focused on quality assurance, such as CSI and CACREP, to help counselors differentiate emerging technology. The development of regulatory committees dedicated to the independent review of mHealth and telemental health platforms for clinical efficacy and quality would address an increasing need in the counseling profession.

The counseling profession's ability to thrive while addressing this projected upward trajectory is contingent upon measures enacted now by counselors, counselor educators, students, and professional associations. Through great uncertainty, our leadership, resilience, and determination ensure us a brighter future. At a time in history that feels insurmountable, we stand together at the precipice of hope.

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