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Boundaries for Pastors without Addiction Counseling Licensure in Counseling Addicted Clients in Recovery

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Opinion

Holistic addiction treatment requires an attention to spirituality [1]. One of the main issues today is that many counselors claim the mantle of spirituality via the 12-step model, but guide clients down the only path of spirituality they know, which is their own personal path, rather than remembering that such spirituality comes in all manner of forms [2]. Spiritually grounded recovery now has empirical support, and thus we cannot ignore this vital component of recovery for our clients [3]. Kehoe proposes an empirical model of attention to spirituality which deserves more study and replication [4]. However, prior to implementation of a spiritual model and wholehearted inclusion of the faith community in the recovery movement, boundaries must be built and attended to.

In February of 2002 I met a remarkable pastor, Reverend Sharon, a dear friend, and someone who moved into her own recovery program in March of the same year. As Rev. Sharon's recovery progressed, she would query me and others on the connections between the 12 steps of recovery and not only her own spirituality, but how she should proceed when working with folks in recovery as a "pastor in recovery," but without specific addiction counseling training. The following is the result of eight years of her journey along the path of building appropriate boundaries when doing spiritual guidance with folks in recovery. The following text is primarily Sharon's words, speaking from an interview I conducted with her, at her home in November 2009.

What led you into Doing Spiritual Work with Folks in Addiction?

"My own recovery and what a spiritual process that was for

me. It started when I realized how crucial my spirituality was to my recover. I didn't decide to do it, people sought me out. With the women I sponsor most of the get to a place where they find something spiritually lacking in their lives...the more time people have sober, body, mind and spiritually, the more they realize that something spiritual is lacking. I realized for myself that the whole time I was drinking, it was a spiritual thirst I was trying to satisfy with chemicals...I was taking care of everyone else's spiritual lives, but not doing a whole lot for my spiritual life, and I hit a place where that wasn't enough. I call it spiritual starvation."

"The one thing I have to keep in mind for myself is just how vulnerable people are when they are hungry spiritually and how much trust they place in anyone they share to choose their spiritual selves with...."

"I think it was Augustine that said there was a god shaped hole inside of everyone... I think that's where my recovery and my spiritual connection. What I used to try to fill up that void was alcohol. I replaced that with the spiritual life, and some of those spiritual practices are very unconventional.. fishing, playing with my dogs, basically anything that is life affirming can be spiritual... so much of rediscovering a spiritual connection is about being comfortable in our own skin."

What are some of Your Boundaries?

"I am not currently sponsoring, but I would not sponsor anyone who was in the church, dual relationships are inevitable in small communities. A mistake I made was attending a meeting in my own church, that is not a choice I would make today...I am very careful

what I share in those meetings of my own story... I don't share as much of my own story as I used to, but I will talk very specifically about spiritual things."

Sharon noted that her spiritual guidance clients in recovery look to her for far more than she can ethically deliver as a pastor. Some ask for legal advice, some ask for medication advice, others ask for advice about information imparted by their counselors. Sharon is very clear with her clients that her work with them is entirely spiritual exploration, and that while she is entirely comfortable working through their spiritual issues, the client needs to rely on guidance from an expert within each specific area rather than seeking information that is outside of Sharon's area of expertise from her.

Sharon also has learned the necessity of strict boundaries of time and content when working with the recovering community, to illustrate, she said, "I meet with folks monthly for about an hour to an hour and half once monthly to minimize transference. The more frequently that you meet with someone in that "power-over" situation, the more likely it will happen. I don't have the tools to deal with that transference. The general rule as a pastor is to see the same person three times about the same issue and beyond that asking that they seek professional help. Beyond that they will see you as something other than their pastor; [however], it is fine if the pastor is trained in that area."

Sharon went on to say that it should not be a hard and fast rule to only meet with someone three times, for about an hour and a half, once a month. This boundary is very situational, and depends heavily on the pastor's comfort level and the client's ability to not step directly into transference issues.

Sharon noted that a lot of the conversations she has will center around telling people to find a God that works for them, and often times that God is Christian, but just as often not. Thus, another boundary is to not direct the client to the God of the pastor's choosing. Snodgrass and Corcoran [5], discuss the importance of spirituality in addiction recovery, and conclude that autonomy, amongst other factors, is vital to utilizing spiritual counseling in addiction recovery.

Sharon has worked primarily with women, adolescents, and the LGBT community. Describing her experiences with adolescent she states, "Another fascinating group I have worked with is adolescents ages 13 to 18 in long term rehab, both boys and girls. In my experience they have the ability to ask much deeper harder questions than a lot of adults do." Sharon went on to describe adolescents as a group who questions everything and trusts very little, making the work both more difficult and more rewarding. She goes on, "I give them the space to explore, make it very, very clear there are no dumb questions and no wrong answers, and I encourage them to think creatively in their spirituality. I tell them that spirituality is about experience and religion is about rules, and spirituality doesn't have any rules."

Suggested Boundaries for Pastors without Addiction Counseling Licensure in Counseling Addicted Clients in Recovery

Recovery of pastor: The pastor or spiritual guide, if in recovery, must have two years of sobriety at minimum.

Meeting settings: Meetings between the pastor and client should be formal meetings. Preferably a professional office with scheduled times for the meetings. However, the setting should be mutually comfortable for both client and pastor. Home meetings are not precluded as many professions (i.e. Social Workers) do meet clients in the homes of their clients, and as many pastors have office space for such meetings in their homes as well.

Religion: Spiritual issues must never include attempts by the pastor to convert a client to any general or particular religious affiliation or point of view. Spiritual discussions should be designed to help clients elicit their own spiritual meaning in their lives and events in their lives.

Malpractice: The pastor should work strictly within their licensed area of expertise. Be very clear as their spiritual advisor at the beginning of each session what your expertise is, and do not deviate from that.

Referrals: Do redirect the client to an expert if a non-expert has given advice (i.e. their sponsor has told them that anti-depressants are merely a new addiction and has recommended the client end use of their prescribed meds), but do not comment on advice given by an expert in another field. It is appropriate to tell clients to seek second opinions from experts. Also, redirect clients to an expert if they seek advice from you that is outside your area of expertise. Know the appropriate referral sources in your region well.

Dual relationships: Avoid dual relationships with clients. Do not sponsor clients you are spiritually directing, have the client obtain a sponsor other than yourself.

Self-disclosure: Recommended in limited scenarios, but do not over self-disclose.

Space to explore: Your God is not their God, your type of recovery is not their type of recovery, give the client wide space to explore who their God(s) are, and space to explore recovery that fits their spiritual needs.

Legal issues: Know the laws in your state as regards your position as a pastor who is counseling people, particularly know any applicability of addiction laws, state and federal, to your work.

Parish/denomination guidelines: Understand fully the guidelines and boundaries set by your parish and denomination for working with people one on one, or in groups.

Ordination: Do not portray yourself as a pastor unless your ordination is currently in effect.

Treatment planning: Your work should be seamlessly unified with the treatment plan from the client's facility. It is essential that you have a release of information between you and the treatment facility, particularly should a crisis arise.

In closing, some words of importance from Sharon about the primary reason behind the need for boundaries for the pastoral/spiritual counselor working with the addicted population: "What better place for someone who wants to do harm to hide? How easy it is for people who are spiritually hurting to confuse a spiritual connection for a sexual connection, and that is where the boundaries are important. Newly sober people usually don't have a lot of boundaries, which makes it more important for addiction counselors and spiritual counselors to set these boundaries and hold them in place." Reverend Sharon, at her home, November 2009 [6-8].

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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