

Interview with a Clinician

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Abstract

On Tuesday, June 28, 2022, I conducted an interview with Sandra Raney, a licensed independent mental health professional for Open Door Counseling in Gering, Nebraska. The purpose of the interview was to gain an understanding of the counseling profession, what it takes to be a good counselor, the use of technology with clients, the importance of membership of professional organizations and the role continuing education plays in the career of a clinical mental health counselor.

During the course of the interview, Sandra also stated what it takes to be a good counselor and how you will know you have been an effective counselor with your clients. Sandra also talked about how best to balance the various roles and functions of a counselor as well as providing advice for future counselors. By interviewing a mental health clinician, my own future practice will benefit substantially from the insight gained in the interview.

Introduction

On Tuesday, June 28, 2022, I conducted an interview with Sandra Raney, a licensed independent mental health professional for Open Door Counseling in Gering, Nebraska. The purpose of this interview was to gain an understanding of the counseling profession and what it is like to be a professional mental health counselor. During the course of the interview, Sandra shared her experiences as a mental health counselor and the various roles she fulfills in her position. She also discussed the importance of being a member of professional organizations as well as many other issues related to mental health counseling such as what it takes to be an effective counselor and what are some of the main causes of mental health issues in both in our local community and in American society in general.

Sandra started her counseling career as a started her career as a substance abuse counselor in 2007 and obtained her Master's of Arts in Counseling in 2010. Sandra has worked with men and women in all settings and, in particular, has worked with individuals who have experienced trauma, especially military veterans and women. She has experiences in working in outpatient, hospitalization and partial hospitalization, prison, and transition living units for sex offenders (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022). Sandra was established in private in 2014 and is both EMDR trained, EMDR addictions trained, and specializes in treatment of trauma and addictions.

Interview Summary

Causes of Mental Health Issues

The interview began by answering the question what are the leading causes of mental health issues today. Sandra responded she thought “trauma, dysfunctional

families, broken families and broken family relationships” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) to be a major cause of mental health issues today. Sandra went on to refer to these as “dysregulated attachments” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) whereby most individuals have personal relationships based on attachment and those attachments become dysregulated because individuals focus on other aspects of their lives and not their important family relationships. This dysregulation can, and does, in turn cause trauma on additional family members. Sandra gave the example of the mother who spends too much time chasing men and not attending to her child and returning veterans as examples of individuals inflicting dysregulation on their family members, which then leads to secondary or collateral traumas. Sandra continued by saying that research has shown “sustained trauma can change the DNA make up of five generations” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) of family members.

Membership and Benefits of Professional Organizations

The next part of the interview discussed membership of professional organizations and what benefits of membership of such organizations provide. Sandra said she is a member of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing International Association (EMDRIA), American Psychological Association (APA), National Counselor Association (NCA), National Association of Alcohol and Drug Counseling (NAADAC), Texas Board Certification for Addiction Professionals, the National Counselor Association, and PESI, which is an organization that is centered and focused around trauma. Sandra went on to say that the benefits of being a member of such organizations included receiving, “and a lot of in-depth training into areas of expertise”

(Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022). They also offer research, which can be used, as a resource in counseling in can be useful when you are questioning a topic or issue or need to reach out for additional resources. In addition, being a member of such organizations offers networking opportunities and the chance to meet with other counselors from a cross the country and compare what counseling strategies and techniques they may be using. Sandra recommends being a member of these organizations for communication and also for advocacy and education. She also said that in the case of education it is important to educate and advocate in the community so those who need mental health services are more likely to get the help they receive and that communities are more will in to provide such help to due advocacy and education through the associations.

Credentialing, Certification, and Licensure

On the issue of credentialing, certification, and licensure, Sandra said everyone is required in general to have at least a master's degree and be properly licensed with the state they intend to practice in before they can counsel any clients. "All statues...specify that applicants possess at least a master's in counseling or a closely related field" (Brooks & Gerstein, 1990, pg. 479), this is true of most states and is a requirement in Nebraska. There are further certifications and requirements if you want to work with certain groups, such as alcohol and drug counseling, those with disabilities, trauma, and children. Sandra said that it is important to get certifications and credentialing in those areas and specialties in which you wish to focus to improve your expertise and counseling practice. When discussing the issue of the effect public policy has had on credentialing,

certification, and licensure Sandra suggested at the federal level, the influence of public policy has been somewhat limited in that credentialing and licensure is not standard across the country and is instead regulated at the state level. Most decisions about credentialing and licensure is set by state legislatures. Sandra did say there had been much more involvement in public policy when it came to drug and alcohol counseling licensure, but even there the requirements still varied from state to state. When Sandra came to Nebraska from Texas it took two years for her to get her credentialing and licensure even though she was certified and qualified in the State of Texas.

What makes a good Counselor

The next question I asked Sandra was what in her opinion made her a good counselor. Sandra stated that she is “open to conversation and willing to take ownership of a mistake” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) when she makes a mistake. She is also willing to work and explore with clients and has strong empathy skills. Sandra continued by saying that when it comes to the groups she works with, they are most often works adults and families and much less with children because she does not know how “to play” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022). She also works a lot with veterans. She understands where they come from because she is a veteran herself. Sandra said she knows she is a good counselor because she can see the improvement in her clients and, sometimes, clients will return sometimes years later to thank her for being the intervention in their lives.

Balancing various roles and functions

For the next question Sandra was asked how she balances multiple roles and functions across specialty areas. Sandra stated she works to be an advocate for all her clients with the various organizations and agencies. This means she has to work with her clients to get help from all the different agencies and organizations to which they are entitled. She says this is important because, in many cases, the client cannot be treated for a mental health condition until other factors that are resolved in their lives. This includes finding a job or applying for benefits such as Medicaid and food stamps. In many ways, this is an example of social action whereby action “can occur on behalf of a client” (Gladding & Newsome, 2018, pg. 44) and Sandra advocates for her clients as long as they need to do what they need to do and have been held accountable during their treatment.

The interview continued with a discussion of what current therapies and treatments she uses on clients. Sandra stated that she is “eclectic and will use whatever skills I have in my toolbox to help engage the client” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) and will use whatever treatments and therapies will best help the client. She suggests that if you are going to work with clients who have trauma, you become qualified to use Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) in counseling as this can be a great tool for helping clients recover and heal from trauma. Sandra also said she uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to help clients with “their distorted thought processes” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) and she also use Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) to help clients better regulate and control their emotional issues.

Use of technology in counseling

The interview next moved on to the issue and use of technology in counseling. When it comes to organizational systems to keep track of client notes and other important information Sandra's practice uses AccuCare. She also says that all three computers are hooked up to Outlook to make it easy for counselors and staff to communicate with each other. Sandra went on to say she does not use other technologies such as telehealth because she has a hard time reading the client and that to her telehealth "is a barrier" (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) between her and the client. There is also "high probability that some clients could fabricate their feelings and issues, just to impress the person on the other end" (Mageshprasath & Yuvaraj, 2021, pg,1762). She also does not use other forms of technology communication, except for webex, which she feels is more secure than other technologies such as Zoom. Sandra did express a concern about the use of technology in that not all technologies, such as Zoom are secure and are open to breaches in confidentiality.

Issue of self-care

The interview moved on to a discussion about self-care and how separate work and personal time to maintain your own mental health. Sandra said she separates her work and personal time by not taking any work home with her and making time for herself each day to do the things she likes to do. This includes praying at regular times of the day as she is a Benedictine monk and she must "follow the calendar" (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) and also reserving time to do a crafting project, which she also feels, is practicing mindfulness skills. By spending time on self-care we

are able "to preserve the self in order to use it for the other" (Skovholt, 2012, pg. 115). Therefore, self-care is important if we are to be able to help and treat our clients effectively.

Dealing with ethical dilemmas

The interview carried on with a discussion of ethical dilemmas. Sandra said that when she is presented with an ethical dilemma She likes to talk to other clinicians to discuss the issue. One dilemma Sandra did face recently involved her work with a low functioning sex offender who had been inappropriately touching a child. During the course of therapy, it became apparent there was at least two other victims of the offender and the question was whether to refer him for these offenses since they were revealed during counseling. Since Nebraska is a mandated reporter state and requires all sex offenses to be reported, she felt obliged to report him for the further offenses by making an appointment with the District Attorney's office to report the offenses. Sandra felt a conflict because she was required to report the offenses and yet at the same time she wanted to provide help to a client who was low functioning and was unable to manage his affairs on his own. Sandra was concerned about "acting in the best interests of the client" (Gladding & Newsome, 2018, pg. 44) but at the same time, was required to report a criminal act which involved a child. In this situation, as a mandated reporter she was obliged to report the two further cases to the appropriate authorities.

Advice for future counselors

The interview concluded by asking Sandra for one piece of advice she has for future counselors. Sandra said, “first and foremost take care of yourself, establish healthy boundaries” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) and have supports in place when you have ethical dilemmas and are struggling. She also said that it should not be beneath the counselor to get counseling themselves and that by doing so they are “role modeling” (Raney, personal communication, June 28, 2022) behaviors and actions to the clients.

Conclusions

The interview was informative and I gained insight into the counseling profession and some of the things I might expect to encounter as a counselor. One thing that Sandra said made a good counselor was the importance of education. During the course of the interview, she brought up the issue of education several times and she said it is always important to learn new ideas, techniques, and therapies. Sandra went on to say that in the end it is the client who is most important and you should do everything possible to help the client including improving one’s self through education and training. Sandra also stressed the importance of self-care and finding time away from counseling. This is important for your own mental well being as a counselor but also to ensure that the counselor is mentally fit and able to help their clients.

I found the interview to be an important learning experience on the road to becoming a clinical mental health counselor. I can use the points and issues raised in the

interview and incorporate them into my own understanding of counseling. The interview made me think of ideas and aspects of counseling I had not previously thought of, such as the importance of education and membership of professional organizations. As I continue on the path to becoming a counselor, I will use what I learned from Sandra to become a better counselor.

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