

Understanding and managing ethical distress in psychological practice

DAVIDSON, G. (University of the Sunshine Coast), & MORRISSEY, S. (Griffith University)
gdavidso@usc.edu.au

Little attention has been given by psychology to the phenomenon of ethical distress, despite its potential to impair psychologists' professional functioning as practitioners and/or researchers. Ethical distress manifests itself in distressing thoughts and accompanying emotional reactions that arise in situations where psychologists know what the right thing to do is but where they are constrained or coerced into following a less right course of action, i.e., one is compelled to one's detriment psychologically into acts or omissions that one considers unethical or immoral. This workshop explores the origins and definitions of the concept of ethical distress before examining closely its aetiology and the manifest symptoms that accompany the belief that one has been compromised ethically and professionally. Participants are encouraged to consider possible causes of ethical distress in their particular areas of psychological practice as well as the possible consequences for their practice and personal well being in the short and long term. Methods of measuring ethical distress are examined and participants will practise with a number of instruments that have been designed for this purpose. Methods of responding to symptoms of distress are explored with a view to identifying those means of responding that have the potential to relieve distress in the short term and to result in personal and professional growth in the long term. The implications of applying these methods to manage the symptoms of distress, to promote well functioning, and to assist line and professional supervisees to manage their distress, are considered. Participants work systematically through a number of vignettes that illustrate the causes and consequences of being compromised ethically and professionally.

Self care issues in the treatment of severe personality disorders

STEVENS, B. (Independent Practice)
bruce@drbruceastevens.com.au

Psychological treatment involves entering an intimate relationship with our patients. There are considerable risks in doing this with the severely personality disordered. Consideration is given to the underlying dynamics of personality disorder in terms of the primitive self: omnipotence, emotional dis-regulation, impulsivity, lack of insight, lack of empathy, hyper-sensitivity, idiosyncratic interpretations of reality, and polarized relationships. The main focus is to appreciate risks associated with treating the Antisocial Personality, especially with traits of psychopathy, and the Borderline Personality. There will be opportunities to talk about difficult patients and including limited opportunity for de-briefing. Topics include: warning signs including recognizing dangerous patients including those likely to be aggressive or suicidal or both, risks of empathy, primitive emotional communication, such as, 'I will hurt you to get you to understand how I hurt!', counter-transference dynamics and the potential for emotional damage, importance of psychological boundaries, practical strategies for self-protection and self-care. There will be a discussion about the particular risks of crossing sexual boundaries in such a treatment process. It is also noted that self-care is an ethical responsibility according to the APS code of conduct. This four hour workshop has been presented through the APS in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney in 2008.