Ethical Considerations when Working with Non-Religious Clients

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A Bit About Your Presenter

• Yes… I am an atheist.
• Yes… I am married.
• Yes… I have kids.
• Yes… my wife and kids are Christians.
What this Talk is *Not* About

- Whether or not God or Gods exist
- Changing someone's spiritual or religious beliefs
- Whose beliefs are right or wrong
Purpose of this Training

*It’s About the Client*
Learning Objectives

1. Participants will understand basic terminology surrounding religious and nonreligious belief systems.
2. Participants will learn about best practices for working with nonreligious clients.
3. Participants will be able to articulate therapeutic support resources for nonreligious clients.
4. Participants will hear, and an opportunity to participate in, a panel discussion focused on ethical practice issues.
1.04 Competence

(a) Social workers should provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, license, certification, consultation received, supervised experience, or other relevant professional experience.

(b) Social workers should provide services in substantive areas or use intervention techniques or approaches that are new to them only after engaging in appropriate study, training, consultation, and supervision from people who are competent in those interventions or techniques.

(c) When generally recognized standards do not exist with respect to an emerging area of practice, social workers should exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps (including appropriate education, research, training, consultation, and supervision) to ensure the competence of their work and to protect clients from harm.

National Association of Social Workers, 1999
NASW Code of Ethics

1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity

(a) Social workers should understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.

(b) Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients’ cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients’ cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups.

(c) Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability.

National Association of Social Workers, 1999
Definitions
If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a “sound?”

It depends on what you mean by “sound.”
“Religiosity refers to personal beliefs in a God or gods and organized or institutional practices and beliefs (e.g., church attendance, sharing congregational values), whereas spirituality is described as a belief in a higher power and/or mystical experiences accompanied by less participation in traditional forms of worship—although scholars lament that these terms are frequently conflated.”

(Zinnbauer et al., 1997)
Non-Religious and Non-Spiritual

“Non-Religiosity refers to a lack of personal beliefs in a God or gods and organized or institutional practices and beliefs (e.g., church attendance, sharing congregational values), whereas non-spirituality is described as a lack of belief in a higher power and/or mystical experiences accompanied by less participation in traditional forms of worship—although scholars lament that these terms are frequently conflated.”

(adapted from Zinnbauer et al., 1997)
Non-Spirituality

“... non-spirituality is defined as having no belief in any sort of higher power, life force, universal presence, or obligation to a spiritual soul or being.”

(D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007)
Spiritual but Non-Religious
Atheist vs. Agnostic

- Atheism - lack of belief in gods
- Agnosticism – “we can’t really know if god(s) exist(s) or not”
The 6 Types of Atheism

1. Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic – reader/debater
2. Activist – vocal, political
3. Seeker-Agnostic – embraces uncertainty
5. Non-Theist – generally disengaged and unconcerned
6. Ritual-Atheist – finds religious traditions useful
Other Helpful Terms

• **Humanism** – humans can make their own meaning and purpose
• **Naturalism** – there’s no “supernatural”; nature is all there is
• **Skepticism** – a generally questioning attitude
• **Normative Ethics**
  • **Consequentialism** – The consequences matter
  • **Virtue Ethics** – The intentions matter
  • **Deontology** – The rules matter
• **Freethought** – beliefs should be formed on the basis of logic, reason, and empiricism
Other Types of -theism

- **Theist** – One who believes in god(s)
- **Monotheist** – One who believes in only one god
- **Polytheist** – One who believes in many gods
- **Deist** – One who believes in a “hands off” creator god
- **Pantheist** – One who believes everything is god
- **Anti-theist** – One who is antagonistic towards religion
- **Apatheist** – One who doesn’t really care about this discussion at all
It Gets Confusing

“Christians” who don’t believe in God

“Atheists” who think that God is real
“Taboo” Your Words

Replace the “Symbol” with the “Substance”