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Counseling Journeys

Reflections and Voices from the Field

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Gerald Corey

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COUNSELING JOURNEYS

Reflections and Voices from the Field

GERALD COREY



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May you be inspired to pursue your passions and dreams in creating a legacy of making a difference.

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Brief Contents

	Prefacexi
	About the Authorxiii
	The Guest Contributorsxvi
	Self-Assessment: An Inventory of Your Attitudes and Beliefs About Counselingxxiv
CHAPTER 1	Creating Your Professional Journey	1
CHAPTER 2	Turning Points in My Professional Career	19
CHAPTER 3	Surviving and Thriving in Graduate School	31
CHAPTER 4	Self-Doubts and the Imposter Syndrome	46
CHAPTER 5	Benefiting From Practicum, Internships, and Supervision	57
CHAPTER 6	Career Paths in Counseling	68
CHAPTER 7	The Counselor as a Person and a Professional	107
CHAPTER 8	Taking Care of Yourself	128
CHAPTER 9	Multiculturalism/Social Justice/Advocacy	154
CHAPTER 10	Becoming an Ethical Counselor	180
CHAPTER 11	Managing Values in Counseling	201
CHAPTER 12	The Counseling Profession	222
CHAPTER 13	Counseling Theories Applied to Practice	248
CHAPTER 14	The Practice of Group Counseling	275
CHAPTER 15	Becoming a Writer	289
	References	298
	Index	303

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Detailed Contents

Preface	xi
About the Author	xiii
The Guest Contributors	xvi
Self-Assessment: An Inventory of Your Attitudes and Beliefs About Counseling	xxiv

CHAPTER 1 Creating Your Professional Journey1

Introduction	1
Becoming a Professional Involves a Journey With Twists and Turns	2
Giving Back to Others—Paying It Forward	3
Obstacles to Your Effectiveness	6
Mentors Enhance Your Learning	7
Finding a Mentor	7
Make Mentoring a Meaningful Experience	7
Personal Experiences With Mentors	10
Chart Your Own Personal and Professional Journey	12
Becoming a Competent Counselor Is a Lifelong Journey	13
The Challenges Two Women of Color Faced in the Academic World	14
Reflection Questions	18

CHAPTER 2 Turning Points in My Professional Career19

Introduction	19
Some Significant Turning Points in My Professional Career	19
Navigating the Tenure and Promotion Process	20
Striving for Balance Between Work Time and Family Life	21
Working With My Life Partner as a Team	22
Some Lessons Learned in Our Work in a Foreign Country	23
Taking the Road Less Traveled	27
Keeping Accolades in Perspective	27
Retirement Is Not in My Picture	28
Creating a Legacy	29
Reflection Questions	30

CHAPTER 3 Surviving and Thriving in Graduate School31

Introduction	31
What You Need to Know About Graduate Counseling Programs	31
How to Survive and Thrive as a Graduate Student	32

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Gatekeeping as a Professional Responsibility of Counselor Training Programs . . . 34
After a Master’s Degree, Consider Pursuing a Doctoral Program 37
Experiences of Doctoral Students 38
All But Dissertation 42
Creating a Balance in Your Personal and Professional Life 44
Reflection Questions 45

CHAPTER 4 Self-Doubts and the Imposter Syndrome.46

Introduction 46
Don’t Allow Self-Doubts to Stop You 46
Challenging the Imposter Syndrome 47
Perfectionism Is Not Good for Your Health 50
Self-Imposed Pressure 52
Making Mistakes Can Be an Opportunity for Growth 55
Failing Is Not Fatal 56
Reflection Questions 56

CHAPTER 5 Benefiting From Practicum, Internships, and Supervision. 57

Introduction 57
Maximizing Your Experience in Practicum and Internships 57
Guest Contributors Describe Their Experiences in Practicum, Internship, and
Supervision 59
Selecting a Supervisor 64
Supervision Can Be Therapeutic 65
Seeking Supervision From Multiple Sources 65
Reflection Questions 67

CHAPTER 6 Career Paths in Counseling68

Introduction 68
Suggestions for Creating Your Career 68
Making Career Choices Amid Uncertainty 69
Choosing Your Career Path 69
A Career in School Counseling 74
 Counseling With Children in Elementary and Middle School 74
 Counseling With High School Students 77
Predicting Future Trends in Trauma and Disaster Mental Health Counseling . . 80
Choosing a Career in Addictions Counseling 89
Rehabilitation Counseling as a Career Option 92
Private Practice as a Career Option 96
Couples and Family Counseling 100
Coaching as a Career Option 104
Reflection Questions 106

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CHAPTER 7	The Counselor as a Person and a Professional	107
	Introduction	107
	Personal Characteristics of Effective Counselors	107
	Dealing With Client’s Transference and Managing Your Countertransference	
	Reactions to Clients	109
	The Cost of Caring and Connecting With Your Client	110
	Dealing With Difficult Clients	111
	Reframing Resistance	111
	Difficult Client or Difficult Therapist?	111
	Dealing With Clients Who Offend Us	112
	Dealing With Mandated Clients Who Are Belligerent or	
	Challenge You	112
	Self-Disclosure Guidelines	116
	Appropriate Counselor Self-Disclosure	116
	Finding a Balance Between Disclosing Too Much and Disclosing	
	Too Little	119
	Benefits of Personal Therapy for Counselors	121
	Reflection Questions	127
<hr/>		
CHAPTER 8	Taking Care of Yourself	128
	Introduction	128
	Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes That Promote Wellness	131
	Diet and Nutrition	131
	Physical Activity as a Way of Caring for Ourselves	132
	Re-create Yourself Through Recreation	132
	Spending Time in Nature	133
	Relationships With Self and Others	134
	Religious/Spiritual Involvement and Meaning in Life	134
	Providing Service to Others	135
	Developing a Mindfulness Approach to Daily Life	137
	Self-Compassion as a Route to Caring for Others	138
	Integrating Realistic Self-Care Strategies in Your Daily Life	138
	Create Your Own Self-Care Action Plan	141
	Coping With Stress and Preventing Burnout	141
	Our Way of Thinking Influences Our Ability to Manage Stress	141
	Developing Resilience as a Way to Cope With Stress	144
	Recognizing the Path to Burnout	145
	Personal Experiences in Curbing Burnout	145
	Empathy Fatigue as a Route to Burnout	146
	Preventing Burnout	149
	Reflection Questions	153

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CHAPTER 9	Multiculturalism/Social Justice/Advocacy	154
	Introduction	154
	My Cultural Background	154
	Becoming Aware of Cultural Tunnel Vision and Our Biases	155
	The Path Toward Cultural Competency	157
	Cultural Considerations in Counseling Diverse Populations	158
	Understanding Key Cultural Concepts in Counseling Latino Clients	158
	Understanding People With Disabilities	161
	Advocacy Responsibilities of Counselors	164
	Reflections on Incorporating Multicultural/Social Justice/Advocacy in Counseling Courses	173
	Reflection Questions	179

CHAPTER 10	Becoming an Ethical Counselor	180
	Introduction	180
	Learning to Tolerate the Gray Zone in Dealing With Ethical Dilemmas	180
	My Approach to Teaching Ethics in Counseling	181
	Resolving Ethical Dilemmas	182
	Applying a Decision-Making Model to Resolving an Ethical Dilemma	184
	Ethical Issues Involved in Assessment and Prevention of Youth Suicide	185
	Boundary Issues in Counseling	188
	Managing Boundaries Personally and Professionally	188
	Dual and Multiple Relationships Are Not Inherently Unethical	191
	Preventing Boundary Crossings From Becoming Boundary Violations	192
	Boundary Considerations Involving Social Media	193
	Meeting a Client Outside of the Office	194
	Ethics of Accepting Gifts From Clients	194
	Boundary Considerations in Nonerotic Touching in Counseling	195
	Dealing Ethically With Sexual Attractions in the Therapeutic Relationship	196
	Legal Concerns and Risk Management Strategies	197
	Reflection Questions	200

CHAPTER 11	Managing Values in Counseling	201
	Introduction	201
	The Ethics of Imposing Our Values on Clients	201
	Managing Our Values in Counseling	204
	Determining When Referrals Are Appropriate	207
	Creating Safety in Therapeutic Relationships with LGBTQIA+ Clients	210
	The Role of Religious and Spiritual Values in Counseling	213
	Meaning in Life and Values	218
	Reflection Questions	221

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CHAPTER 12	The Counseling Profession	222
	Introduction	222
	The Journey Toward Leadership in the Counseling Profession	222
	Changes in the Counseling Profession Since the 1960s	232
	Challenges Facing the Counseling Profession Today	234
	The Present Status and Future of Technology in Counseling	236
	Reflection Questions	247
<hr/>		
CHAPTER 13	Counseling Theories Applied to Practice	248
	Introduction	248
	My Foundational Theory	248
	Developing My Personal Theoretical Orientation to Counseling	249
	The Role of Research in Counseling Theories	251
	Evidence-Based Theories as the Standards	254
	Solution-Focused Brief Therapy	256
	Integrating Neuroscience in Clinical Practice	259
	Identifying Which Theoretical Approach(es) to Adopt	262
	Tailoring Your Therapeutic Approach to Flexibly Meet Client Needs	262
	Designing Your Integrative Approach to Counseling	264
	Journeys and Reflections of Leaders in Various Theories	265
	A Resource for Understanding Contemporary Counseling Theories	272
	Reflection Questions	274
<hr/>		
CHAPTER 14	The Practice of Group Counseling	275
	Introduction	275
	Groups as a Treatment of Choice	275
	Creating Trust and Safety Within a Group	276
	My Role as a Group Facilitator	276
	Working With a Here-and-Now Focus in Group Counseling	277
	Dealing Effectively With Conflict in a Group	278
	A Counselor Educator's Journey in Group Work With Diverse Populations	278
	The Benefits of Experiential Group Training	281
	Cultural Factors in Group Counseling	284
	Globalization of Counseling and International Group Work	285
	Reflection Questions	288
<hr/>		
CHAPTER 15	Becoming a Writer	289
	Introduction	289
	My Motivation for Writing Textbooks	289
	Factors Contributing to Writing a Successful Book	290
	Changes in Ways of Writing Books	290
	Suggestions for Writing a Book	291
	Writing Proposals for Professional Conferences	295

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Writing Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles 295
Therapeutic Benefits of Personal Journal Writing 296
Reflection Questions 297

References 298
Index 303

Preface

I have given presentations at American Counseling Association conferences for many years, including a program titled “Becoming a Professional Counselor: For Graduate Students and New Professionals.” The attendees ask many questions about navigating a counseling career and balancing their personal life with a professional life. I decided to write this book to reach out to a larger audience beyond the people who attend these annual meetings. In preparation for writing this book, I asked many of my colleagues and students to provide topics for my consideration, and I added a range of subjects I wanted to address as well. I hope this book is an inspiration for students in the helping professions and for counselors who are beginning their personal and professional journey.

In *Counseling Journeys: Reflections and Voices From the Field*, I share my experiences and the lessons I have learned over my 60-year career in the counseling profession. This book deals with a wide range of topics pertaining to becoming a counselor, and it has a unique element titled *Voices From the Field* in which key figures in the counseling profession describe their counseling journeys and reflect on their experiences.

As I was writing I imagined myself talking with my students, and my intention is to be practical, personal, and inspirational. In many ways this book is a mentoring endeavor, providing suggestions and advice on subjects relevant for counselors-in-training and for new professionals. Topics addressed include creating your professional path, mentoring, surviving and thriving in graduate school, challenging the imposter syndrome, practicum and internships, getting the most from supervision, an overview of careers in counseling, the counselor as a person and as a professional, taking care of yourself, multicultural/social justice/advocacy perspectives, becoming an ethical counselor, managing value conflicts in counseling, messages from leaders in the profession on the future of the counseling profession, counseling theory and practice, group counseling, and becoming a writer. At the end of each chapter, *Reflection Questions* invite you to engage in thinking about and applying these topics to yourself.

This book is a useful supplement for a variety of courses in counseling, including an introduction to the counseling profession, practicum and internship courses, and choosing careers in counseling. It is also useful for courses such as ethical and professional issues in counseling, theories of counseling, and multicultural counseling.

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The book was written for graduate students (on both the master's and doctoral levels) and new professionals.

Counseling Journeys is a combination of my perspective on topics in every chapter and stories from guest contributors who provide lessons from their personal and professional journeys. Many of the subjects in this book were addressed in my earlier book, *Personal Reflections on Counseling* (Corey, 2020), published by the American Counseling Association, and this book builds on the foundation of my earlier book. I appreciate ACA granting permission for me to use portions of the *Personal Reflections on Counseling* book in this new book with Cognella.

Counseling Journeys is a team effort, and I want to express my appreciation for all those on the team and their role in the development of this book. The 55 guest contributors who provided *Voices From the Field* selections deserve special recognition for sharing lessons they have learned from their professional journeys.

The entire staff at Cognella Academic Publishing made producing this book an extremely positive experience. Kassie Graves, Senior Vice President, Editorial, initiated the project and offered consistent encouragement and support. I appreciate the services of others on the Cognella staff: Amy Smith, Associate Editorial Manager; Casey Hands, Senior Production Editor; Jess Estrella, Senior Graphic Designer; and Stephanie Adams, Senior Marketing Program Manager.

Special thanks to Kay Mikel, who has been the copy editor of our books for 3 decades, for her skillful way with words.

Marianne Schneider Corey reviewed the manuscript and provided insightful and helpful feedback.

About the Author

Gerald “Jerry” Corey, EdD, ABPP, currently holds the position of Distinguished Visiting Professor of Counseling at the University of Holy Cross in New Orleans, where he teaches intensive courses virtually in counseling theories, group counseling, and ethical and professional issues in counseling. He is also professor emeritus of human services and counseling at California State University at Fullerton. He received his doctorate in counseling from the University of Southern California in 1967. He was awarded an honorary doctorate in humane letters in 1992 from the National Louis University. He is a Diplomate in Counseling Psychology, American Board of Professional Psychology; a licensed psychologist; and a National Certified Counselor. He is a fellow of the American Psychological Association (Division 17, Counseling Psychology; and Division 49, Group Psychotherapy); a fellow of the American Counseling Association; and a fellow of the Association for Specialists in Group Work. Both Jerry and Marianne Corey received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Mental Health Counselors Association in 2011, and both received the Eminent Career Award from the Association for Specialists in Group Work in 2001. Jerry was given the Outstanding Professor of the Year Award from California State University at Fullerton in 1991. He received the Thomas Hohenshil National Publications Award in 2021. He is the author or coauthor of 16 counseling textbooks currently in print, along with more than 70 journal articles and book chapters. Several of his books have been translated into other languages. *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* has been translated into Arabic, Indonesian, Portuguese, Turkish, Korean, and Chinese. *Theory and Practice of Group Counseling* has been translated into Korean, Chinese, Spanish, and Russian.

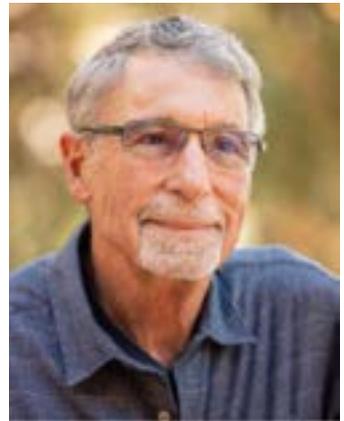


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Jerry Corey has conducted workshops in the United States, Germany, Ireland, Belgium, Scotland, Mexico, Canada, China, and Korea with a special focus on training in group counseling. In his leisure time, he likes to hike and bicycle in the mountains and the desert, and he enjoys giving his grandchildren rides in his 1931 Model A

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Ford. Marianne and Jerry have been married for 60 years, and they have two adult daughters, and three grandchildren.

Jerry Corey has authored or coauthored the following books published by the American Counseling Association:

- *Counselor Self-Care* (2024, with Michelle Muratori, Jude T. Austin, and Julius A. Austin II)
- *Clinical Supervision in the Helping Professions: A Practical Guide* (3rd ed.; 2021, with Robert Haynes, Patrice Moulton, and Michelle Muratori)
- *Personal Reflections on Counseling* (2020)
- *The Art of Integrative Counseling* (4th ed.; 2019)
- *ACA Ethical Standards Casebook* (7th ed.; 2015, with Barbara Herlihy)
- *Boundary Issues in Counseling: Multiple Roles and Relationships* (3rd ed.; 2015, with Barbara Herlihy)
- *Creating Your Professional Path: Lessons From My Journey* (2010)

Jerry has authored or coauthored the following books with Cengage Learning:

- *Groups: Process and Practice* (11th ed.; 2026, with Marianne Schneider Corey and Cindy Corey), which has been translated into Korean, Chinese, and Polish
- *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions* (11th ed.; 2024, with Marianne Schneider Corey and Cindy Corey), which has been translated into Japanese, Chinese, and Korean
- *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (11th ed.) and corresponding *Student Manual* (2024)
- *Theory and Practice of Group Counseling* (10th ed.) and corresponding *Student Manual* (2023)
- *Becoming a Helper* (8th ed.; 2021, with Marianne Schneider Corey)
- *I Never Knew I Had a Choice* (11th ed.; 2018, with Marianne Schneider Corey and Michelle Muratori)
- *Group Techniques* (4th ed.; 2015, with Marianne Schneider Corey, Patrick Callanan, and J. Michael Russell)
- *Case Approach to Counseling and Psychotherapy* (8th ed.; 2013)

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He has also made several educational video programs on various aspects of counseling practice:

- *Counseling With the Case of Gwen* (2019)
- *Group Theories in Action* (2019)
- *Ethics in Action* (2015, with Marianne Schneider Corey)
- *Groups in Action: Evolution and Challenges* (2014, with Marianne Schneider Corey)
- *Counseling With the Case of Stan and Lecturettes* (2013)
- *Integrative Counseling: The Case of Ruth and Lecturettes* (2013, with Robert Haynes)
- *Lecturettes for Theory and Practice of Group Counseling* (2012)

All of these programs are available through Cengage Learning, and they are included in the MindTap programs for several of Corey's books.

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The Guest Contributors

The guest contributors have added immense vitality and meaning to this book, providing a diversity of thoughts, experiences, and perspectives. The contributors represent a wide range of perspectives and are diverse with respect to race, cultural identity, gender, professional experiences, and specialties in the counseling profession. The contributors include graduate students in counseling, counselor educators, licensed professional counselors, social workers, clinical and counseling psychologists, marriage and family therapists, rehabilitation counselors, mental health practitioners, and others as well. These 55 guest contributors wrote a total of 85 separate essays. I greatly appreciate their honesty, courage, and wisdom in sharing their experiences.

Dominic Augustin, MEd, NCC, CRC, is a doctoral student in counselor education at Pennsylvania State University. He has worked with people living with disabilities and with underserved communities.

See Chapter 6, “Getting Involved in Rehabilitation Counseling”

Jude Austin, PhD, LPC-S, LMFT, is an associate professor in the Master of Arts in Counseling program at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor and serves as the interim associate dean of social sciences.

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See Chapter 6, “Establishing a Private Practice”

See Chapter 8, “Practical Self-Care Strategies”

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See Chapter 6, “Establishing a Private Practice”

See Chapter 8, “Practical Self-Care Strategies”

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See Chapter 13, “Evidence-Based Practice: Show Me the Downside!”

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See Chapter 6, “High School Counseling as a Career”

See Chapter 10, “Youth Suicide: Lessons Learned From a School Counselor”

Christine Suniti Bhat, PhD, LPC, LSC, is a professor in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education in the Patton College at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. She is the 73rd president of the American Counseling Association (2024–2025).

See Chapter 12, “Leadership Reflections From an Asian Indian First-Generation Immigrant”

See Chapter 12, “Visions for the Future of the Counseling Profession”

James Robert Bitter, EdD, is a professor emeritus of counseling in the Department of Counseling and Human Services at East Tennessee State University.

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See Chapter 13, “Reflections on Becoming an Adlerian Psychotherapist”

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See Chapter 1, “I Am Not a Coach—I Am a Black School Counselor”

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See Chapter 12, “Finding the Leader Within”

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See Chapter 11, “Avoid Imposing Your Values on Clients in Blatant or Subtle Ways”

See Chapter 11, “Moral Injury: What It Is and Why You Should Know About It”

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See Chapter 14, “Enhancing Human Connection Through International Group Work Experiences”

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See Chapter 12, “Artificial Intelligence in Counseling: Current Practices and Future Trends”

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See Chapter 9, “Counseling Latinos: Cultural Considerations”

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See Chapter 9, “Social Justice and Counseling: The Imperative of Advocating for Equity”

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See Chapter 9, “Reflections on Being an Anti-Racist Counselor”

See Chapter 12, “Becoming a Leader in the Counseling Profession”

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See Chapter 8, “How Neuroscience Informs Counselor Wellness and Well-Being”

See Chapter 13, “Neuroscience-Based Care: An Invitation to Counselors”

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See Chapter 8, “Coping With Stress in a Post-Pandemic World”

See Chapter 14, “Preparing Students for Active Participation in an Experiential Group”

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See Chapter 6, “Executive Coaching as a Career”

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See Chapter 9, “Intentional Integration of Multicultural/Social Justice Lens in Counseling Courses”

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See Chapter 7, “Choose Your Therapist Intentionally”

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See Chapter 1, “Why Mentoring Matters”

See Chapter 9, “Why DEI Matters in Our Field”

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See Chapter 6, “The Culturally Competent Clinical Military Counselor”

See Chapter 8, “Transcending Empathy Fatigue”

See Chapter 9, “Counseling People With Disabilities”

Diana M. Ward, PhD, MA, PLPC, is a therapist at the New Orleans Institute for Trauma and Compulsive Behaviors at River Oaks Hospital.

See Chapter 3, “Gatekeeping: A Matter of Ethics”

See Chapter 5, “Getting the Most From Your Practicum, Internship, and Supervision Experiences”

See Chapter 7, “To Disclose, or Not to Disclose”

See Chapter 10, “Testing of Boundaries”

See Chapter 11, “Navigating Spaces”

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See Chapter 12, “Future Prospects for Distance Counseling and Supervision”

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See Chapter 11, “Ethically Incorporating a Spiritual Perspective in Counseling”

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Self-Assessment: An Inventory of Your Attitudes and Beliefs About Counseling

This inventory surveys your thoughts on various topics about counseling. It is designed to introduce you to many of the topics presented in this book and to stimulate your thoughts and interest. Taking this self-assessment and reflecting on the topics in this book will assist you in formulating your own perspective on these subjects.

This is not a traditional multiple-choice test in which you must select the “one right answer.” Rather, it is a survey of your thoughts on specific topics related to the counseling profession. For each question, write in the letter(s) of the response(s) that most clearly reflect(s) your view at this time. In many cases the answers are not mutually exclusive, and you may choose more than one response. In addition, a blank line is included for each item so you can provide a response more suited to your thinking or to qualify a chosen response. Because this inventory is subjective and there are no correct answers, it is not possible to score this self-assessment. I encourage you to take this inventory before reading the chapters.

Notice that there are two spaces before each item. Use the space on the left for your answer at the beginning of the course, or before you start reading the chapters. At the end of the course, or when you finished reading the book, take this inventory again, placing your answer in the space on the right. Cover your initial answers so you won't be influenced by how you originally responded. Doing this as a pre- and post-assessment of your attitudes and beliefs will provide you with an understanding of any shifts in your thinking.

1. **Personal therapy for counselor trainees.** For those who wish to become counselors, I believe personal therapy
 - a. should be required in counselor education programs.
 - b. is useful only when trainees have personal problems.
 - c. should be encouraged but not required.
 - d. is necessary only when countertransference issues emerge in practicum and internships.
 - e. _____

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2. **Counselor effectiveness.** To be an effective clinician, I believe a practitioner
- must be able to form a therapeutic alliance early in the therapy relationship.
 - must be free of any personal conflicts in the area in which the client is working.
 - needs to have experienced their own psychotherapy before seeing clients.
 - needs to have experienced feelings or situations similar to those being experienced by the client, but not necessarily the same problem.
 - _____
3. **Multicultural knowledge and skills.** Practitioners who work with culturally diverse client populations without having multicultural knowledge and skills
- may be ineffective in establishing positive relationships with clients.
 - may be practicing unethically.
 - should seek consultation from a supervisor with multicultural expertise.
 - may be acting illegally.
 - _____
4. **Dealing with diversity.** Practitioners who counsel clients whose sexual identity, race, age, social class, or sexual orientation is different from their own
- need to possess multicultural competencies.
 - need to be willing to broach these differences with clients early on.
 - should refer the client to someone who is more culturally competent.
 - will probably not be effective with such clients because of these differences.
 - _____
5. **Understanding and managing values.** In terms of appreciating and understanding the value systems of clients who are culturally different from me, I would
- share my personal values with them as a way to educate them.
 - refer them to another therapist.
 - tailor my treatment approach to fit their worldview.
 - familiarize myself with the specific cultural values of my clients.
 - _____

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6. **Role of values in counseling.** My position regarding the role of values in counseling is that, as a counselor, I should
- a. never impose my values on a client, for doing so is unethical.
 - b. expose my values, without imposing them on the client.
 - c. encourage my clients to reflect on why they hold certain values.
 - d. keep my personal values out of the counseling relationship.
 - e. _____
7. **Incorporating spirituality and religion in counseling.** Regarding the role of spiritual and religious values, as a counselor I would be inclined to
- a. keep spirituality/religion separate from the counseling process.
 - b. get my clients to think about how spirituality or religion could enhance their lives.
 - c. avoid bringing up religious/spiritual concerns unless my client initiated such a discussion.
 - d. conduct an assessment of my client's spiritual and religious beliefs during the intake session.
 - e. _____
8. **Gift-giving.** If a client were to offer me a gift, I would
- a. accept it since refusing could damage our relationship.
 - b. never accept a gift from a client under any circumstances.
 - c. discuss the matter with a supervisor or colleague before accepting a gift.
 - d. explore with my client the motivations for giving me the gift.
 - e. _____
9. **Clinical supervision.** My view of supervision is that it is
- a. place to talk about my personal problems.
 - b. an opportunity to increase my clinical skills.
 - c. a necessary component of becoming an effective clinician.
 - d. a way for me to learn about myself and to get insights into how I work with clients.
 - e. _____

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- 10. Social justice counseling.** Counseling from a social justice perspective involves addressing the realities of oppression, privilege, and social inequities. The implications of this for me is that I
- need to be passionate about bring about change in society.
 - need to teach my clients how to become advocates for themselves.
 - must be committed to assisting people in gaining full participation in society.
 - need to be an advocate beyond the office if I am to make a difference.
 - _____
- 11. Advocacy competence.** To become a competent client advocate, a counselor must
- gain awareness of their own beliefs, attitudes, and biases as they relate to the social and political factors contributing to the problems of marginalized and underserved populations.
 - speak out against injustices and be willing to take action to address injustices.
 - engage in considerable reflection before taking action.
 - assess whether to they possess the advocacy competencies necessary to bring about change.
 - _____
- 12. Becoming an ethical counselor.** For me, being an ethical practitioner *mainly* entails
- acting in compliance with the ethical standards of my professional organization.
 - reflecting on the effects my interventions are likely to have on the welfare of my clients.
 - practicing from the perspective of mandatory ethics.
 - thinking about risk management strategies to avoid malpractice suits.
 - _____

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13. Dealing with a client's feelings. If a client expressed strong feelings of attraction or dislike for me, I would

- a. invite my client to explore the meaning of their feelings.
- b. engage in self-disclosure so my client will know my feelings toward them.
- c. refer my client if these feelings were negative.
- d. ask my client how their reactions to me relate to why they are in therapy.
- e. _____

14. When to refer. I would tend to refer a client to another counselor

- a. if I did not have competence in dealing with the client's presenting issues.
- b. if I were experiencing countertransference and being triggered by my client.
- c. if I saw my own needs and problems getting in the way of helping the client.
- d. if I had a value conflict with my client.
- e. _____

15. Nonerotic touching in therapy. Concerning the issue of physically touching a client, I think touching

- a. is unwise because it could be misinterpreted by the client.
- b. should be done only when the counselor has a clinical rationale for doing so.
- c. is a crucial part of the therapeutic process.
- d. is ethical only when the client requests it.
- e. _____

16. Technology-enhanced counseling. Regarding the practice of distance counseling, I believe

- a. I would not provide distance counseling without having some personal contact with the client.
- b. technology offers promise for clients who would not, or could not, seek out face-to-face counseling.
- c. it is limited to dealing with simple problems and not deeper problems.

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- d. I would not provide distance counseling without being competent in delivering technology-assisted therapy.
- e. _____
- 17. Not receiving good supervision.** As an intern, if I thought my supervision was inadequate, I would
- bring up my reactions with my supervisor.
 - continue to work without complaining so I don't get a negative evaluation.
 - do what I could to change supervisors.
 - bring the matter up with the administrator in charge of the agency.
 - _____
- 18. Unethical behavior.** Of the following, I consider the most unethical form of therapist behavior to be
- not referring a client when I experience countertransference.
 - becoming sexually involved with a client.
 - failing to take into account a client's cultural background.
 - accepting a client who has a problem that goes beyond my competence.
 - _____
- 19. Being ready to counsel others.** I won't be ready to be a counselor until
- I have worked through unfinished business from my past.
 - I have experienced personal counseling as a client.
 - I feel free of self-doubts or have managed my imposter syndrome.
 - I have developed the ability to examine my own life and relationships.
 - _____
- 20. Ethical decision-making.** If I were faced with an ethical dilemma, the first step I would take would be to
- discuss the dilemma with my client.
 - consult with an attorney or a supervisor.
 - identify the problem or dilemma.
 - decide on the best course of action.
 - _____

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- 21. Mentoring.** In choosing a mentor, I would look for a person who
- a. I would be able to partner with in a research project or writing.
 - b. would also be my personal counselor.
 - c. could provide me with tips for creating my career.
 - d. would help me deal with my self-doubts.
 - e. _____
- 22. Creating my professional path.** In creating my professional journey, I am most interested in
- a. selecting a career where I can make a good income.
 - b. thinking about how I can influence the people with whom I work.
 - c. being able to work with colleagues who will support and challenge me.
 - d. creating a legacy that will live beyond me.
 - e. _____
- 23. Self-doubts.** When it comes to self-doubts about my fitness to be an effective counselor, I am concerned about
- a. letting my self-doubts get the best of me.
 - b. knowing how to challenge self-doubts so that I can progress.
 - c. gaining self-confidence and believing I am in the right profession.
 - d. what others will think of my performance.
 - e. _____
- 24. Self-disclosure.** The most important guideline determining the appropriateness of engaging in self-disclosure as a counselor is
- a. if my disclosure is beneficial to my client.
 - b. wondering what my client will think of me based on what I disclose.
 - c. using disclosure as a technique to encourage my client to be disclosing.
 - d. knowing when and why to make self-disclosures to my client.
 - e. _____

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- 25. Managing boundaries in counseling.** In establishing boundaries I am concerned about
- what drawing boundaries will do to the counseling relationship.
 - becoming too rigid.
 - what my client will think of me.
 - knowing what boundaries are helpful and which are harmful.
 - _____
- 26. My perspective on artificial intelligence.** The trend toward the increased use of artificial intelligence (AI)
- frightens me.
 - excites me because of its great potential as a tool in counseling.
 - makes me wonder how AI will affect my work as a counselor.
 - supports my belief that ethical guidelines need to be established.
 - _____
- 27. Being a leader in the counseling profession.** When I think about becoming a leader in the counseling field,
- I have a hard time envisioning myself as a leader.
 - I think of being a servant leader.
 - I wonder how I can develop leadership abilities.
 - I worry that I may misuse power in my work.
 - _____
- 28. My theoretical orientation.** If I were asked to identify the theoretical orientation that guides my practice, I would say that
- I adhere to a single theory that is evidence-based.
 - theory is relatively unimportant because I tend to do what feels right in my work.
 - I rely on an integrative approach because no one theory has a monopoly on the truth.
 - I am a humanistically oriented therapist.
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- 29. Becoming a writer.** When I think about myself as a writer in the counseling field,
- a. I hope to write a book on a subject that I am passionate about.
 - b. I feel overwhelmed and believe this is out of my reach.
 - c. I would like to write about some aspect of my counseling practice.
 - d. I wonder if I have what it takes to be disciplined in sticking to the task of writing.
 - e. _____
- 30. Presenting at a professional conference.** When I think of giving a presentation at a professional conference,
- a. my fear of having my proposal rejected gets in my way.
 - b. I am concerned that I don't know enough about a subject to do a presentation.
 - c. I become enthusiastic over the potential of networking with colleagues.
 - d. imposter syndrome looms so large that I avoid submitting a proposal.
 - e. _____

CHAPTER 1

Creating Your Professional Journey

Introduction

When I first decided to become a teacher, my conscious motivation was to help others; however, I was not aware of what I would be getting from helping others. Eventually I realized that multiple motives were operating in my career choice, and becoming a counseling psychologist and a counselor educator has met my need to make a difference in the lives of students. This is a basic motivation that energizes me today.

You may have altruistic reasons for choosing your professional path, and it is important to recognize that you feel good when helping others. But your desire to become a counselor may also include your need to make an impact on others; to give back to society what you have been given; to understand yourself more fully or to resolve personal issues; to feel the appreciation associated with being needed; to study and understand what drives human behavior and behavioral change; or to develop answers to problems and find solutions that help others. Your professional endeavors should be satisfying. If some of your own needs are not met through your work, you may lose interest in what you are doing. Several needs and motivations may be operating at the same time, and your reasons for continuing on this path may evolve and strengthen throughout your professional journey.

If you find meeting your clients' needs satisfying, you are more likely to create a rewarding career for yourself. But it is important to understand whose personal needs are being met through your work. Meeting your personal needs at the expense of your clients' needs is unethical. For example, if you have a strong need to be appreciated and praised, you may seek positive feedback from your client instead of focusing on what your client needs. Your professional path will be built based on many choices you make early in your career.

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Becoming a Professional Involves a Journey With Twists and Turns

My career path has been marked by many twists and turns. I began by learning about counseling in general, and my focus narrowed as I took other turns during my professional journey. I have maintained interests in many aspects of my work through teaching, writing textbooks, and making educational videos. Teaching has always been my primary area of interest, and from this general area I eventually developed specialized interests in counselor education, ethics in counseling practice, theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy, and group work. Following my interests and doing what seemed most personally meaningful has guided my professional course.

Becoming the professional you aspire to be will evolve and change over time. Here are some ideas to consider as you create your personal and professional journey (modified from M. S. Corey & Corey, 2021):

- Reflect on all that you *can* do rather than on what you cannot do.
- Listen to your inner voice, and strive to trust your intuitions.
- Do not hesitate to ask for help when you need it. You cannot do everything by yourself.
- Cultivate meaningful relationships with friends, colleagues, and family members who can offer you encouragement.
- Talk with professionals in the field you wish to pursue. Ask what they do, how they decided on their career, the pros and cons of what they are doing, and thoughts they may share about entering the counseling profession.
- Participate in volunteer work as well as in employment or internships in the field you hope to pursue. Gaining direct experience can help you sample potential career pathways.
- Explore and take risks by trying different kinds of professional activities or working with different populations. You may discover new interests that had not previously occurred to you.
- Realize that who you are as a person has a key impact on the professional you are becoming.
- Invest in taking care of yourself in mind, body, and spirit. Realize that your ability to care for others is contingent upon taking care of yourself.
- Be willing to obtain supervision and consultation, regardless of the stage of your career.

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- Seek out a mentor or several mentors to guide you in creating your professional path.
- Keep in contact with those people who are significant in your life.
- Learn more about how your own culture is an important part of you, and cultivate an interest in learning about people from cultures different from your own.
- Do your best to be genuine, and never lose yourself by putting on a professional demeanor.
- Put forth your best efforts, set high standards for yourself, and at the same time be kind to yourself and accept your limitations.
- Avoid burdening yourself with trying to be perfect and never making mistakes. Have the courage to be imperfect.
- Acquire and nurture a sense of humor. Avoid taking yourself too seriously, and laugh at your foibles.
- Reflect on how you can make a significant difference in the lives of others.
- Become a member of at least one professional organization, attend conferences, and consider presenting at conferences.
- Engage in self-reflection and keep a personal journal.
- Make a commitment to pay it forward.
- Envision what you would like your legacy to be.
- Dare to dream and then be willing to take steps to transform your ideals into reality.

As you reflect on these ideas, which seem most helpful to you? What ideas are you willing to put into action?

Giving Back to Others—Paying It Forward

Inspiring others has been a motivating force throughout my entire career. It gives me immense satisfaction to be a source of encouragement to my students, to provide support, and to nudge them into finding and following their passions. Providing service to others is not a completely altruistic endeavor; I am aware of the personal satisfaction I derive from being in a position to make a difference in the lives of students and mentees. I appreciate my students' deep commitments to social justice work and to doing what they can to better their community and the world. Although this may seem ambitious as a teacher, I am convinced that we can bring about

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change in the world through our desire to give back to others what we have been given. We each have unique talents, and putting these talents into action is a vital part of striving toward self-actualization.

Small ripples can have a cumulative impact that expands your influence. You may have gravitated toward the counseling profession because of the profound impact teachers, counselors, and family members had on you—now you can pay it forward. Even as graduate students, many of you have already derived satisfaction and fulfillment from assisting people in navigating their struggles. Caring about others is certainly a worthy ideal, and it is essential to take care of yourself so you can sustain your efforts in providing service to others.

In an article titled “An Unexpected Career Choice,” Tyce Nadrich (2024) described himself as a stereotypical “disgruntled adolescent.” He eventually enrolled in a community college but had no vision of getting a degree or charting a career path. Nadrich took a course in abnormal psychology and found the instructor and the course fascinating. With this instructor’s encouragement, he took additional psychology courses so he could transfer to a 4-year university, where he obtained his bachelor’s degree in psychology. He admits that he was a mediocre student with a low GPA, nevertheless he applied to a graduate counseling program and was granted an interview. He performed well in the interview and was accepted in the master’s program. After Nadrich graduated with a master’s degree in counseling and became a licensed counselor, he began working with “disgruntled youths” in juvenile detention. Many of these young people told him that he was the first counselor who engaged them in a positive way. For Nadrich, the feedback from his young clients affirmed that he was making a difference as a counselor. He then pursued a doctoral program and found a community of professors who mentored, supported, and encouraged him. These mentors saw potential in Nadrich that he could not see in himself, and they helped him believe there was a need for him in the counseling profession. In his article Dr. Nadrich stated: “As a counselor educator and clinician, I now have the pleasure of continuing this tradition by helping others recognize their value and worth” (p. 48). He is truly an individual who is dedicated to giving back to others and paying it forward.

Like Dr. Nadrich, Dr. Jamal Boudion also had a limited vision of what he could do as his life’s work. Both of these men had mentors who saw their potential even though they did not see it in themselves. Dr. Boudion did not think he would pursue a career as a counselor, much less become a counselor educator, yet his accomplishments have far exceeded anything he ever imagined. Dr. Boudion has dedicated his life to working with students in middle school, and his mission is to help them achieve greatness. His journey is largely about paying it forward.

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VOICES FROM THE FIELD

I Am Not a Coach—I Am a Black School Counselor

Jamal Boudion, PhD, LPC, NCC, is a school counselor and adjunct faculty member in the Department of Counseling at the University of Holy Cross in New Orleans. He has speaking engagements in many parts of the country.

I never imagined that I would pursue a career as a counselor, or even more, as a counselor educator. Being a Black man from the project, standing 6 feet 5 inches tall and weighing more than 300 pounds, people viewed me as being an athlete who could take my family out of the hood. Well, God had other plans for me. I am currently a school counselor in my home town, Marrero, Louisiana.

I have found so much joy in serving my students and clients. I was a shy and introverted person. I feared how people would perceive me, so I loved being in the background and not being visible. After completing high school, I found myself compelled to attend college. People assured me that a college degree would guarantee a decent income, but I found out that this was not true. No one told me that receiving a bachelor's degree in psychology would require much more education. After I graduated, my family had a huge celebration for me, and it was a blast. I was the first person in my family to graduate from college. Soon, however, I felt a wave of sadness because I felt like I had wasted 5 years of my time working on a bachelor's degree in psychology. I was burdened with a significant amount of student loan debt but without any justification. I could not find a decent paying job, and I was ready to give up.

I was reluctant to return to school for a master's degree until I came to understand its necessity. I did not want to be a counselor because I did not believe I could help people with their concerns. Therapy was taboo in our community. If you needed a therapist, people would write you off as crazy. The Black community instilled in us the values of strength, resilience, and faith in God. They also instructed us not to discuss family matters outside the home. If you became emotional or weak, it meant that you did not have enough faith. Throughout my journey, I have learned that this is not true. God still loves you, even if you have a therapist. When I emailed the dean about the master's program in school counseling at the University of Holy Cross in New Orleans, she called me 5 minutes later and said, "Jamal, come in to school tomorrow to see me." I met with her, and when she finished scheduling my classes she told me that I had to pay a \$50 registration fee. I did not have a dime to my name. The dean decided to pay it for me because she saw something in me that I did not see in myself. She saw the light that I had tried to dim for my whole life. She saw greatness in my weakness. She told me, "When you finish, Jamal, pay it forward." That is something that has been and will always be with me.

Today, I write these words in triumph to let you know who I am. Not only did I receive my master's degree in school counseling, but I also received a PhD in counselor education and supervision at the age of 29 from the same university. In 2022, I was a National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) Minority Fellowship Program (MFP) Doctoral Fellow. My life changed when I became a minority fellow. I am forever grateful to NBCC and my limited edition family for helping my life have so much more meaning. I am a school counselor

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at C. T. Janet, a pre-K through eighth grade school in Marrero, Louisiana, which is in the Jefferson Parish School District. I work with children and adolescents who deal with cognitive, emotional, and other behavioral concerns. I also work with Black men who deal with stress, anxiety, depression, grief, and relationship issues. Who would've thought that this Black boy from the Marrero Project could accomplish all of this?

As a school counselor, I have been able to be a huge representative for every Black student. There is a scarcity of Black male school counselors. I feel honored to be able to hold space, advocate, and promote mental wellness across the board. Being a Black male school counselor has its challenges. I must constantly advocate for my role. Because of my appearance, many students and teachers initially perceive me as a coach. I also have to remind staff and students that I am not a disciplinarian. Staff have also mistaken me for a parent, a dean, or a scary person. Despite daily microaggressions, I continue to fulfill my responsibilities. I am at a school with more than 1,000 students, and they deal with so much grief, anxiety, trauma, and many family issues. I find joy in just offering my presence and a safe space for them. I constantly remind myself to never underestimate the power of presence. Just standing in the hallway, smiling, and saying good morning changes my students' mood. I cannot put into words what these students mean to me. I humbly say that my presence truly makes a difference in any space in which I operate. I dedicate my heart to assisting children and adults in appreciating the beauty of therapy.

In conclusion, never give up, no matter what. I did not know I had these outstanding opportunities ahead of me. The journey was not easy, but it was worth it. Let your light shine in any environment in which you work. Everything is connected to you. Do not shrink yourself because playing small does not serve the world. We need your big heart to assist in healing our people's hearts and minds. I could have given up a long time ago, but I kept going. Despite many other options, I would not have fulfilled my purpose. Finally, I would like to remind everyone that I am not a coach—I am a Black male school counselor, and I love it.

Obstacles to Your Effectiveness

One thing that gets in the way of the effectiveness of new professionals is trying too hard and expecting to be perfect in whatever you do. When beginning to see clients in a graduate program, students often focus on what technique to use, what to say next, and how they are being perceived by the client. It is difficult to be present with an individual client when your mind is distracted in this way. Work to put these thoughts aside and concentrate on listening to the person before you. Your task is to listen carefully and deeply to clients and to let them lead the way. If you are able to even minimally enter the world of your clients, you increase your chance of being present for them. Counselors are not solely responsible for the outcomes of therapy. By enlisting your clients as collaborative partners in the therapeutic work, you can emphasize what is happening for your clients in the present moment and use this as a guide to explore it in the future.

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REVIEW COPY ONLY—DO NOT DUPLICATE, DISTRIBUTE, OR POST**Mentors Enhance Your Learning****Finding a Mentor**

Students often ask, “How can I find a mentor?” Potential mentors may be found among your friends, fellow students, family members, counselors, professors, supervisors, and sometimes in surprising places. Some will offer guidance and suggestions, others may support your efforts as you navigate your educational and professional career. Your personal and professional journeys may take you down different paths, and mentors can be extremely useful and supportive along the way. Be clear in your own mind about how this person could be most useful to you. If you are reluctant to approach a potential mentor, I encourage you to challenge yourself and reach out to those who could be most helpful to you. Ask whether this person has the time and interest to take on another mentee, and you may be surprised at the answer. Mentoring is a reciprocal relationship, so think about what you have to offer as well as what you hope to gain from this relationship. It is likely that collaborating and working with this person will benefit both of you. Before you approach a potential mentor, ask yourself, “What do I want to learn from this mentoring experience?”

Make Mentoring a Meaningful Experience

Mentors can have a powerful influence in helping us achieve our personal and professional goals. Whenever I felt discouraged during my graduate school experience and early in my career, having people who believed in me gave me a sense of hope. I recognize now how much I valued the belief my mentors had in me, especially when my self-doubts could easily have gotten the best of me.

In my mentoring relationships, I try to teach those I mentor to think for themselves and to speak for themselves. I want to empower them so they can create the kind of professional life they have envisioned. Here are some thoughts I share with my mentees about how to get the most from a mentoring experience:

- Find your own passions and dreams rather than following another’s design for you.
- A mentor may help you find your passion, but you have to take action to pursue your passion.
- As you learn important lessons from your mentors and faculty, put these lessons through your own filter to personalize them.
- If you look up to your mentor, do so for only a short time.
- Experiment and create your own unique style of helping that fits you; stop yourself from attempting to imitate your mentor’s style.

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- Reflect on interpersonal qualities modeled by your mentors, such as demonstrating empathy, compassion, understanding, humility, and authenticity. Strive to acquire these qualities in yourself.
- Find a group of supportive people to offer you encouragement when you are troubled with self-doubt or feel discouraged, yet also seek people who are willing to challenge you.
- Regardless of where you are on your academic or career path, look for ways to teach others what you have learned. Finds ways to give back to others what you have received.
- Think about the kind of mentoring you desire for yourself and the kind of mentor you want to be to others.
- Mentoring is a multifaceted relationship encompassing career, personal life, and key life transitions such as beginning your career. Choose mentors who can support your development through these life transitions.
- Reflect on ways you can build on what you have learned from mentors to develop a better relationship with yourself and with others.

A highly informative book for learning more about mentoring is *The Elements of Mentoring* (Johnson & Ridley, 2018).

In the following *Voices From the Field* contribution, Dr. Hideko Sera shares her views on why mentoring matters. She writes that everyone needs a constellation of mentors and suggests that you would do well to have more than just one mentor. Multiple mentors will address different challenges, aspirations, and tasks.



VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Why Mentoring Matters

Hideko Sera, PsyD, is the executive director of Equity, Inclusion and Belonging at Morehouse College, the nation’s only Historically Black College or University (HBCU) dedicated to Black men. Grounded in her training and education in counseling and clinical psychology, her 25-year career spans education, training, mentoring, and federal advocacy for educational and social justice.

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No one completes a graduate program feeling the same way they did when they entered. Transformative experiences inevitably change us all while learning and reflecting on all that we go through. Also, no one goes through this rigorous graduate education and training alone. The education and training that prepares graduate students to become counselors and provide competent care for those who desperately seek it is not for everyone—and it is not easy. If it were easy, many more would pursue this field. What makes these transformative journeys to work with others’ emotional pain and difficulties much

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more meaningful are those we gravitate toward to learn more about the field, ourselves, and our strengths and challenges—the mentors.

Formal mentorship programs may provide structured interactions between graduate students and their assigned mentors, but informal and organic relationships that turn into mentoring relationships are critical. Unlike supervisors and teachers, who carry unavoidable evaluative responsibilities (W. B. Johnson, 2002), mentors can often relate to our authentic selves that we may be scared to reveal in front of our supervisors and teachers for fear of receiving negative feedback or grades. Sometimes a lecture we attend or a simple hallway conversation with someone who has been in the field longer than we have inspires us. We admire them. We want to be like them. We want to learn from them. We want them to guide us. And we seek them out. It turns out that they, too, want to provide these opportunities for us and get to know us better. There is a reciprocal desire for them to want to work with us. That’s how informal and organic mentorship begins. Mentors believe in our potential even when we cannot see it ourselves (Sera & Johnson, 2022).

I once heard that mentors are people whose funerals we would attend. I think there is profound truth in that simple statement. As I reflect on my few decades of career so far, I can think of a handful of mentors without whom my life would not have been the same. They knew and understood me. They knew the core of my personhood. They encouraged and cheered me up when I was down and doubtful of my ability. They gave me difficult but necessary words when I needed to grow. They championed me and supported my aspirations tirelessly and relentlessly. They were my *onshi* (恩師); this Japanese word for a mentor has a direct translation, “A master who gives blessings.” Some have remained in my life for a long time and become my lifelong mentors and friends, and others mentored me at a time when I needed them the most.

Mentorship is not the same as apprenticeship, where a master craftsperson expects their protégé to dutifully copy the craft that’s been created without adding personal inputs or revisions. One of the critical components of true mentorship is the mentor’s investment in their mentee’s own unique growth and transformative pathways. This notion also connects to another warning of mentorship. Sera and Johnson (2022) warned that mentors are deemed as such only by people who receive and appreciate their mentorship. In other words, when an individual self-proclaims, “I am her mentor” (as opposed to a mentee indicating, “She is my mentor”), there is a sense of ownership that unbalances what is presumed to be a reciprocal relationship. A mentor and a mentee should be equally invested in their mentorship relationship. In a healthy mentorship relationship, a mentor has as much to learn from a mentee as the other way around. So I caution graduate students against people who want to claim you—especially your success but never want to be associated with your mistakes—as those are not your true mentors.

What I can share is that we all need a constellation of mentors. We should aim to have multiple mentors for different challenges, aspirations, and tasks. And, sometimes, we outgrow our mentors. In fact, there comes a point in our life when someone else may seek us to be their mentor. So, until then, we should all humbly and graciously collect the wisdom we receive from our mentors. What our mentors said and did, and how their guidance affected us, should allow us to honor them by handing off what we received from them to the next generation who can benefit from them.

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Teachers who both challenged me and offered me support and guidance when I did not have faith in my own abilities are the most memorable for me. There were times when I doubted that I was cut out to complete a doctoral program in counseling or that I had what it took to be an effective counselor. The mentorship of certain professors stopped me from giving up and gave me the boost to persist and to pursue my goals. In my doctoral program, several classes in statistics were required. I was terrified and felt like dropping out of the program due to my math anxiety. My major professor assured me that my goals were attainable if I was willing to work hard and to persist. It is easy to feel engulfed by fear and to stop too soon. I learned that obstacles are stepping stones that I could use to overcome my fears. By sharing my fears with trusted others, I was able to take control of them, and they became manageable. With the help of a tutor, I passed statistics with a B, which delighted me. This experience taught me that I needed to acquire the discipline to apply myself to learning difficult subjects, to never quit, and to ask for help.

My best teachers and mentors did more than pass on information. They motivated me to want to learn and to believe that I had some gifts to share. When I saw no light, they helped me find my way. They had more faith in me than I had in myself, and that was an inspiration to me.

In the *Voices From the Field* selection that follows, Dr. Courtland Lee credits his mentors with helping him create a meaningful journey as a national and international leader in the counseling profession. His mission in his many years as a multicultural counselor educator has been to mentor students who have eventually distinguished themselves in the counseling profession. Dr. Lee says that he is proud of the many graduate students and young professionals of color whom he has mentored. His basic message from his journey as a multicultural educator and counselor is that you should ensure that you exhibit cultural competency and leave a positive impact on others.

**VOICES FROM THE FIELD*****My Journey as a Multicultural Educator and Counselor***

Courtland C. Lee, PhD, is a past president of the International Association for Counselling and is also a fellow and past president of the American Counseling Association. Dr. Lee acknowledges how mentors influenced him and his professional journey and how he has been committed to mentoring.

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I am a multicultural road warrior. In my 40-plus years as a counselor educator, I have taught at three major universities. While teaching at these prestigious schools, I have written extensively, including seven books on multicultural counseling, two books on

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social justice counseling, three books on counseling African American males, and numerous book chapters and journal articles. Thanks to my scholarship, I have been invited to consult on cross-cultural counseling issues in 15 countries, which has afforded me with the opportunity to travel to every continent save Antarctica.

I often wonder how a working-class Black kid from Philadelphia has achieved international recognition as a multicultural counseling scholar. Similarly, people are often fascinated by my story and my achievements, so I will highlight some aspects of my journey in teaching, mentoring, and writing in the area of multicultural counseling here. I also offer some lessons I have learned along the way in the hope that they will inspire you to achieve all that you can as a professional counselor working in a culturally diverse world.

To begin, mentoring has always been an important theme in my journey. My mentor, whom I met as a master's student, was Alfred Pasteur. Pasteur was a member of the pioneering group of Black counseling scholars who spoke about the Black experience in a scholarly, creative, and completely nonpathological way. He took commonly accepted negative notions about Black people and brilliantly reframed them in terms of psychological and social strengths. Pasteur helped me find my voice as a Black male in the counseling profession. Every time I teach a class, advise a student, or engage in a scholarly activity, I strive to do it in the manner that Al Pasteur would have.

Beginning my career as an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) in 1979 proved to be an extremely challenging time. I came into an institution and a counseling program that had limited experience with cultural diversity. I was seen by many as a “token” hire who was expected to fail. I began to develop my line of research around counseling Black people, which did not resonate with many of my White colleagues and many students. This resistance was magnified when I introduced the first multicultural counseling course in the training program. Given these challenges, I was ready to leave after my first year.

I was fortunate, however, to meet and receive guidance from one of the only tenured Black faculty members at UNC-CH. He told me that I needed to stay true to my agenda, work hard, and that it would take 7 years to achieve a degree of success. His prophesy proved to be correct. I stayed the course and received tenure in my 5th year, and by the time I reached my 7th year I had begun to achieve a national reputation for my scholarly work.

I learned some important lessons during my years at UNC-CH. First, never waiver from your professional or personal goals, no matter the pressures you encounter to do so. Second, if you make up your mind to make things happen for yourself, believe in yourself and work hard, then things will break your way. Third, cultivate an external support network of individuals outside of your institution with whom you can engage in professional counseling activities at the state, regional, and national level for support, recognition, and validation.

In 1987 I left UNC-CH to become the director of the Counselor Education program at the University of Virginia (UVA). I consider my years at UVA to be the most prolific period of my career. I published some of my most important and influential scholarly works in

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multicultural counseling and counseling for social justice during this time. My growing scholarly reputation in the discipline of multicultural counseling not only allowed me to be promoted to full professor but provided me with opportunities to interact with leaders throughout the counseling profession, both nationally and internationally. As I reflect on this time, I had actually become one of those professional leaders.

As my professional stature and visibility rose during my UVA years, I also found opportunities to become a mentor, assisting young scholars and graduate students of color both at the university and beyond. For these individuals, I was perceived as a mentor, father figure, confessor, and advocate—an experience that caused me to reflect on how powerful Al Pasteur's influence on me had been, as I was now passing on his wisdom and insights to a new generation.

My years at UVA also left me with some valuable lessons about the nature of professional counseling and counselor education. I learned the importance of professional service and how it is crucial that as citizens of the profession we must be involved in advancing counseling through our active involvement in professional associations, scholarly pursuits, and related activities. My rewarding interactions with graduate students and young professionals underscored for me the importance of being a mentor. One of my greatest points of pride is the number of graduate students and young professionals of color I mentored at UVA who have gone on to prominence in the counseling profession.

As my journey continued, in 2001 I accepted a counselor education faculty position at the University of Maryland at College Park (UMD). With my colleagues we redesigned the program according to the principles of access, equity, and social justice and focused our training mission on preparing counselors and counselor educators to be leaders and advocates. This program restructuring gave me the opportunity to employ many of the cultural diversity concepts I had written about during my career. It was gratifying to see UMD Counselor Education graduates become leaders in the profession who were advancing concepts of multiculturalism and social justice in their teaching and research. This further reinforced for me the power and importance of being an impactful mentor.

As I reflect on my journey as a multicultural road warrior, I am reminded of the words of one of my heroes, Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in major league baseball in 1947: "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." So, if you take anything from my journey, it should be that whatever you do as professional counselor, be it teaching, writing, or counseling service delivery, you should ensure that you exhibit cultural competency and have a positive impact on others.

Chart Your Own Personal and Professional Journey

Students often do not have confidence in voicing their beliefs, or they believe that others will not listen to them. I nudge these students to begin to act *as if* they could articulate their thoughts and present them in a compelling way. It is rewarding to me to see these students begin to take the risk of speaking. In my mentoring

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relationships, I try to do more than advocate *for* mentees. I want those I mentor to arrive at their own conclusions; I do not want a group of disciples. My hope is that they will accept challenges, take risks, pursue their passions, believe that they can make a difference, and come to recognize that their unique talents can make the world a better place. I assure my students and mentees that they each have unique gifts and that they can facilitate change in individuals, groups, and society if they are willing to use their gifts.

During my entire career, I have been motivated by a desire to make a difference. I receive the most satisfaction from encouraging students to chart their own personal and professional journey. Getting my students to challenge themselves by questioning life and encouraging them to pursue their dreams has always been more significant to me than merely presenting academic knowledge. My work does not end with me but continues through my students as they accomplish goals they did not dream were possible.

Becoming a Competent Counselor Is a Lifelong Journey

You are not alone in your journey toward becoming a competent professional counselor. Be willing to reach out to friends, peers, professors, and mentors to find the support you need and the advice you can use at each crossroad in your path. Seek out at least one mentor who can help you achieve your academic goals and reach your professional ambitions. Imagine the legacy you would like to create, and identify the steps you can take now toward achieving this legacy. Trust yourself to become a competent counselor who will make a key difference in the lives of those with whom you work.

Becoming a competent professional is not a one-time event; it is a lifelong process. Sometimes you will be excited about your future as a counseling professional, and at other times you may be discouraged and wonder if it is all worth the effort. Accept that some insecurity is to be expected, and don't let it burden you. Feeling insecure in your abilities can give you the impetus to work diligently and to put your best efforts into your projects. Counselors-in-training often wonder, "Can I really do this, and how do I know I will be any good at it?" When you experience insecurities about your competence, consider what might be holding you back. Have the courage to challenge your fears and self-doubts so they do not stop you from pursuing your dreams. You will make mistakes along the way, so be willing to acknowledge these missteps and be open to learning from them. Don Quixote dared "to dream the impossible dream," and pursuing your own dream can make all the difference. Do not lose sight of your vision, even when you meet with detours along the road. Believe in yourself and find sources of support and encouragement to help you through tough times. If you work diligently, you can turn your dreams into reality.

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The Challenges Two Women of Color Faced in the Academic World

Racism and discrimination are certainly alive and well in the academic world in counseling programs. There are anecdotal accounts of the struggles and challenges in the field of counselor education based on gender and race. In the two *Voices From the Field* pieces by women of color that follow, it will become apparent that their successes in their professional journeys were due to their courage and a willingness to challenge systemic racism, even in the counseling field. Dr. Angela Coker illustrates some ways in which society stereotypes marginalized individuals based on gender, race, or social class. Dr. Sonia Ramrakhiani traces challenges she faced as a faculty member in a counseling program dominated by White males. Their counseling journeys speak volumes, and they both offer suggestions for creating a meaningful counseling journey.



VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The Accidental Academic: A Message to My Sisters in Higher Education

Angela D. Coker, PhD, LPCC, NCC, is an associate professor at San Diego State University in the department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Her research activities center on the academic and personal experiences of women of color. She is past president of the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development and a longtime active member of the American Counseling Association.

My academic and career development has not been a straight linear journey. I grew up in a New York City housing project and never imagined becoming a faculty member. There were no immediate role models in my social circles who suggested that teaching might be a career possibility for me. I remember one Black teacher in my elementary school who wore a suit and carried a briefcase to and from class. I remember being impressed by him, mostly because of how he carried himself—proud and confident. I come from a strong working-class background where the matrilineal side of my family were sharecroppers who toiled in cotton fields to put food on the table. Later my mother and her siblings were members of the great northern migration when many African Americans left the southern United States during the 1950s and 1960s to seek gainful employment opportunities.

As I reflect on my career trajectory, I had an innate curiosity about the world, and I cared deeply about contemporary social issues that were affecting marginalized communities. Like so many African American girls growing up in under resourced public school systems, I never received any direct career advice or counseling from teachers or family members. I was told that I should get an education and obtain a good job with benefits, but I never received any direct instructions on how to achieve such goals.

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Despite being academically promising, I had no school counselors or teachers who invested any time with me. One of my earliest memories that helped me understand how society may view me as an African American girl occurred during the first day of my second grade year. A White male classmate raised his hand and announced to the White teacher that he knew how to spell the word C-O-N-S-T-I-T-U-T-I-O-N from memory. I watched as my White teacher glowed with pride as she heard my classmate recite the word. I then decided to go home and learn how to spell the word because I wanted to impress her too. The very next day I raised my hand and proclaimed to my teacher that I knew how to spell CONSTITUTION, but she showed no enthusiasm and told me to be quiet and sit down. I returned to my seat feeling deflated and minimized. It was at that moment that I realized society held different notions and expectations about my abilities based on race and gender. Several decades went by before I would share this school incident with anyone, and I believe it had a negative impact on my academic and career development in many ways. My post high school plan was just to graduate from college, wing it from job to job, and hope the perfect career path would magically reveal itself to me. For a brief time, I taught elementary school in New York City, and I even worked for the Internal Revenue Service.

I attended Brooklyn College as an undergraduate and completed my master's in Counseling from the University of Wyoming. I became the first person in my family to obtain a college degree. I began my counseling career in the student affairs division at a mid-sized university in the Midwestern region in the United States. I eventually secured a tenure-track position in Counselor Education upon completion of my PhD. I selected the field of counseling because I really enjoyed working with people and wanted to make a difference in the lives of people. I achieved promotion and tenure and have been teaching in higher education for nearly 20 years. I've engaged in research, professional organizational leadership, teaching, and the mentoring of graduate students and junior faculty. I also became a licensed clinical counselor and had a small private practice that focused mostly on the needs of women of color. As a result of my own career journey, I intentionally integrate discussions about career interests with students, friends, and clients. I titled this paper the "Accidental Academic" not to demean my accomplishments but to call attention to the ways in which society stereotypes marginalize individuals based on gender, race or social class. As an addendum, here are a few helpful hints I learned about career development and being a woman of color in the ivory tower.

1. Collaborate with others and find mentors. Being a woman of color in academia can be stressful and isolating. It is important that you find individuals who align with your personality, values, and research area. So often women of color find it difficult to navigate office politics, the publication pipeline, or the tenure and review process. Mentors may be individuals who share our cultural identity or reside in our departments. However, this does not have to be the case. Mentors can be found in many places. Some are well-known figures in their respective fields, or they can be the custodian worker who shows special interests in your academic or career development.

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- 2. Learn how to work alone. This may be the most painful message of all. Although some workspaces are amicable, many are not because faculty of color may find themselves as the “only” in their departments. Women of color may have to deal with White colleagues who have little experience working with other intellectuals of color. It has been my experience that whenever a Black woman enters a space occupied by Whites the energy in the room automatically changes.
- 3. Engage in self-care and community care. This can involve face-to-face interactions, participation in digital spaces, or belonging to professional organizations. Cultivate your spiritual needs and development as life evolves. Self-care does not need to be financially costly. It can encompass simply taking time out for yourself.
- 4. Don’t seek your validation or personal needs from your department or university. Seek your affirmation from the people who love you (family and friends).
- 5. Be open to new opportunities. Change can be scary, but it is also rewarding. I began my career in counselor education, and now I am in the department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. I can apply my understanding of women and gender development in an interdisciplinary context. I have expanded opportunities to explore the experiences of women and factors that may affect their mental health.



VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Dealing With Challenges as a Woman of Color in Counselor Education

Sonia Ramrakhiani, PhD, is an associate professor in the Higher Education Counseling and Student Affairs program at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. As a counselor, she has served in various roles and settings, including outpatient, in-home, residential, and community college settings. Her professional interests center on social justice initiatives, equity in academia, and self-care.

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As a teenager growing up in India, I didn’t have to think about my identity because of the lack of racial/ethnic diversity, but also because I held so many privileged identities in that context. However, I knew I wanted to be a counselor and sought opportunities to work toward this goal from a young age. My passion for the profession knew no bounds. The reality is that once I started my journey in counseling I faced quite a few challenges. My first challenge came as an international student. Although I knew it would take some adjustment, I didn’t account for the culture shock, shift in teaching/learning styles, and required assimilation into individualistic Western culture. Overcoming this challenge was one of the reasons my career goal shifted from wanting to serve as a counselor to wanting to serve as a counselor educator. As an international student, I realized how crucial it was to be mindful of one’s identities, in areas such as race/ethnicity, gender, and religion. Suddenly, I found myself reflecting on both my dominant and nondominant identities,

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especially given the fact that I flew back and forth from India to the United States. Both in my master's and doctoral programs, I felt isolated and alienated due to membership in several nondominant groups. I thought that surely wouldn't be the case once I was in a faculty position.

During my initial year as a tenure-track professor with all-male faculty at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), I encountered significant challenges in seeking support and mentorship. I was assigned classes that my male counterparts were reluctant to teach or that were known to be unpopular among students. Specifically, in my first year, I was scheduled to instruct several research classes on Saturday mornings at 9:00 a.m., which felt akin to hazing since all other classes were conducted on weekdays at 4:00 p.m. in the evening. Furthermore, in faculty meetings, I was perceived as “overly sensitive” and “inexperienced” by my colleagues. Students found my classes challenging and even lodged complaints with my male colleagues to prompt my departure. Although our program had been undergoing changes prior to my arrival, the students attributed the transition to me. I struggled with the lack of mentorship, the unconventional teaching schedule, isolation, and the challenge of establishing relationships with colleagues and students. I recognized the necessity of approaching the subsequent year differently if I were to remain at this institution.

In preparation for my second year, I aimed to address the isolation and surmised that others at the institution might share similar feelings. After consulting with my department chair, I arranged to host a weekly meeting to discuss multicultural topics such as micro- and macroaggressions, tokenism, and cultural taxation. Initially attended solely by faculty and staff of color, the meetings resembled group counseling sessions, but they effectively fostered a sense of community and mitigated isolation.

I sought to capture student feedback and needs by soliciting feedback at the end of each class. Through these evaluations, I discerned that Saturday morning classes were not conducive to student learning, especially for those who had to leave their families during the weekend to attend. I presented this feedback at a faculty meeting and advocated for rescheduling research classes to weekdays, aligning with the rest of the program's classes. Although advocating for this change was challenging, it was ultimately implemented, enhancing student trust in the program. Moreover, modeling intentional advocacy empowered students to champion their own causes during internships and graduate assistantships on campus.

My department consisted mostly of faculty who were not yet tenured, so if I wanted a mentor, I needed to look outside of my department. I was the only woman of color in my department when I started, so I was intentional in seeking support outside of my department. My associate dean, a Black woman, had heard about my weekly multicultural discussions and wanted to meet with me to offer something similar to this for others in our college. I used this opportunity to ask if she would serve as a mentor because we both felt passionate about multicultural and social justice initiatives. I was afraid to ask, thinking that she was “too busy” or “why me,” but to my surprise she offered to support me in my

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journey during our meeting. I still remember her words of encouragement, “You could do my job better than me.” Hearing those words from my associate dean early in my career was all the validation I needed to keep moving forward.

I have now been at my current institution for 7 years, I am tenured, and I have a strong relationship with my students and colleagues. Our program is more diverse than ever, and I have the privilege of mentoring many women of color counseling students. This does create an invisible load, cultural taxation, but I have built the tools to combat it. Obviously, our institutions need to do better in terms of retaining women of color, but in the meantime I hope to empower you to take on challenges in your own tenure journey with the help of these strategies:

1. Find community: If one doesn’t exist, create spaces for others like yourself.
2. Advocate for yourself: This often means asking for resources or connections to others who may share your identities.
3. Seek mentors: If you aren’t assigned a mentor, or the one assigned to you does not share your passion and vision, take the initiative of finding a mentor.
4. Fake it till you make it: I know imposter feelings can make you question yourself, but trust me, you are exactly where you are meant to be and are making a difference for the students that look like you.
5. Last, practice self-care: You need to establish strong boundaries and practice self-care because it can be taxing to constantly work in a system that seems to be set up against you.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What do you expect to get personally from becoming a counselor and being of service to others?
2. What are your thoughts about the kind of professional journey you would like to create?
3. What kind of person would you hope to choose as a mentor?
4. What kind of experience would you ideally want in a mentoring relationship?
5. What is it like for you to read that becoming a competent professional is a lifelong journey?

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