



EPIC CODE OF ETHICS

Equine Partners in Counseling (EPIC) is an organization created to help mental health professionals learn about and utilize Equine Assisted Counseling (EAC) in their practices. It is based on the first empirical research proving EAC can be even more effective than traditional talk therapy for certain clients.¹

Health care professionals are held to a high standard of practice. Clients are in a vulnerable position because they come to counselors with emotional, mental and spiritual problems. The relationship between the counselor and their client is a fiduciary relationship that is based on trust, especially public trust. Mental health professionals are expected to meet certain standards of behavior and competency because of this relationship. That is why all mental health professionals have a code of ethics to which they are held accountable and why they must be continually involved in ethical training.

All five ethical principles at the core of traditional counseling – autonomy, justice, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and fidelity – also apply to EPIC practice. When planning to conduct equine assisted counseling, therapists must take into consideration the welfare of the horse, plus the welfare of the client, his/her culture, gender, history, condition, wishes, economic status, avoidance of harm and exploitation, conflict of interest and the impairment of clinical judgment. These are the paramount and appropriate concerns.

Mental health professionals are frequently faced with situations that require sound ethical decision-making abilities. Determining the proper course to take when faced with a challenging or blurred ethical dilemma can be difficult. The framework for sound ethical decision-making often encounters gray blurred areas. Blurred situations often become very confusing to the counselor and can present serious barriers to counseling. Ethical guidelines have been established to provide counselors with principles to guide them. When exploring an ethical dilemma, a counselor needs to examine the situation using these principles. At times this alone will clarify the situation, but in more completed cases or blurred ethical issues, resolving these types of dilemmas on the basis of moral principles alone is not enough; rarely is there one right answer to a complex, blurred, ethical dilemma.

EPIC Autonomy encourages clients to establish their own relationship with the horse, and asks the counselor to respect the clients' level of comfort concerning all contact. The individual's freedom of choice and action is paramount, as long as the safety of the horse is not jeopardized. The counselor has a responsibility to encourage clients to interpret interaction with the horse according to the client's own values.

EPIC Nonmaleficence is the principle of "above all do no harm," and applies to the client as well as the horse. It consists of neither inflicting intentional harm, nor engaging in actions that could emotionally or physically harm others, human or equine.

EPIC Beneficence emphasizes the counselor's role in being a positive component in the client-horse and the client-therapist relationships, keeping the welfare of the client first and foremost. The counselor's responsibility is to do well, to be proactive, to prevent harm with possible, and to facilitate a beneficial therapeutic experience between the client and the therapist while also honoring the client-horse bond.

EPIC Justice is treating equals equally and unequals unequally, while putting the welfare of the client first. Part of the effectiveness of EPIC practice is the unique dynamic a horse brings to the equation; the emotional state of the client will quickly determine the balance of power between the two. As the client comes into alignment the power will shift, and "justice" in the form of establishing equality will naturally be allowed to happen. The counselor has a responsibility to let this dynamic play out in appropriate measure while maintaining the client's safety and well-being.

EPIC Fidelity insures that information about the client gathered during observing the client and horse interaction is bound by the same notions of loyalty, faithfulness, and honoring commitments that govern traditional counseling. The counselor must respect the client's confidentiality and inspire trust to allow the therapeutic relationship to grow and strengthen.

1. Trotter, Kay Sudekun, (2006). *The Efficacy of Equine Assisted Counseling for At-Risk Youth and Adolescents*, University of North Texas.