

My Big Concern for the Addiction Counseling Profession

By Kirk Bowden, PhD, MAC, NCC, LPC, NAADAC President

From my perspective, addiction counseling is a specific profession within the field of behavioral health. To be an effective addiction counselor requires a specific, specialized, knowledge base.

Obtaining a graduate degree in psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy or counseling does not fully prepare an individual to be an addiction counselor. I know it did not in my case. I have a Bachelor's degree in interpersonal communication, a Master's degree in counseling, and a PhD in psychology. None of these programs required even a single course in addiction counseling. Not even an overview course was required. My degree programs certainly didn't require me to complete more specific addiction course work such as assessing addiction and substance use disorders, co-occurring disorders, pharmacology of addiction, families and addiction, and/or process addictions, etc. I did take one addiction course in my PhD program as an elective. While I was required to complete a practicum, I was not required to complete even a single minute working in an addiction counseling setting

during that practicum. When I took the required exam to obtain my professional counseling license, I was not even asked one question on addiction counseling.

I hold two behavioral health licenses in my state. Both of my licenses grant me the authority to independently practice psychotherapy with clients whose primary diagnosis is an addiction and/or substance use disorder. Neither license required me to complete a single hour of course work in addiction counseling.

What really frightens me is that I am very certain my story is not an exception but the norm. If you research your own state's licensing requirements for Clinical Psychologists, Clinical Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists, Licensed Professional Counselor, and Licensed Mental Health Counselors, I believe you will find that your state has an absence of substantive addiction specific requirements. That said, those professions are often granted carte blanche authority to provide addiction and substance use disorder counseling services.

Don't misunderstand my intent from this article. I am not opposed to Clinical Psychologists, Clinical Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists, Licensed Professional Counselors and Licensed Mental Health Counselors working in the addiction field. Remember I am one of those people. What I want is for behavioral health professionals to not attempt to practice outside of their personal scope of education, knowledge, and experience. My son is a board certified anesthesiologist. I think a very good one, but even I do not believe my son should be allowed to do cardiac surgery without first obtaining the necessary skills by completing an additional residency in cardiac surgery.

I welcome you and everyone willing to serve in the addiction counseling profession, especially licensed behavioral health professionals. You may already hold a license that grants you authority to practice addiction counseling. However, please do not practice outside of your expertise. Please review TAP 21 to make sure you have the needed expertise in addiction counseling. If you don't know what TAP 21 is, you can rest assured that you should not be practicing addiction counseling. Remember to do no harm!



In addition to serving as NAADAC's President, Kirk Bowden, PhD, MAC, NCC, LPC, serves on the Editorial Advisory Committee for NAADAC's Advances in Addiction & Recovery magazine. While serving in many capacities for NAADAC through the years, Kirk has also served as Chair of the Chemical Dependency Counseling Rio Salado College, Director of the Department of Professional Counseling and Addiction Studies at Grand Canyon University, President of the International Coalition for Addiction Studies Education (INCASE), and as a steering committee member for SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), Partners for Recovery, and the Higher

Education Accreditation and Competencies expert panel for SAMHSA/CSAT. Kirk was recognized by the Arizona Association for Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors as Advocate of the Year for 2010, and by the American Counseling Association for the Counselor Educator Advocacy Award in 2013, the Fellow Award in 2014, and most recently for the Outstanding Addiction/Offender Professional Award in 2015.

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