
Moral Neutrality in Advising

Supporting High Achievers and Struggling Students Alike

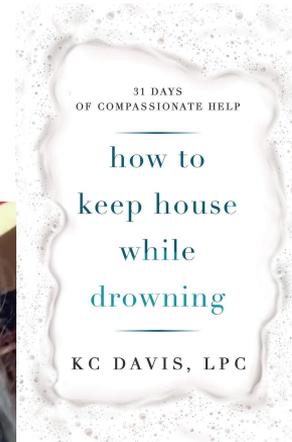
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Objectives

- Identify morally neutral advising scenarios
- Effectively communicate concept of moral neutrality to students
- List and discuss benefits of options with students
- Discuss ways in which moral neutrality can help advocate for students

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- Anything that doesn't affect the way we treat other people is morally neutral.
 - Messy vs. Clean
 - Care tasks
 - Compassionate help - Rest is a right, not a reward. Rest is responsible.
 - Permission to start - 5% - worth doing partially
 - No such thing as laziness
- "Shame is the enemy of functioning. There are more powerful motives than moral obligation."
 - We want functioning students. Their education exists to serve them, not the other way around.
 - Kindness as motivation
 - "Good enough is perfect."



What is moral neutrality?

- “Morally neutral acts are morally right activities that are allowed but not required. One is neither obligated nor prohibited from doing them. One might call them the “merely morally permissible.” Examples of such acts include watching the evening news on television, eating an apple instead of an orange, choosing vanilla over chocolate, whistling while you work, thoroughly chewing your food before swallowing, brushing before flossing instead of after, etc.”

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- What is moral neutrality as it applies to advising scenarios?
 - Two-pronged test:
 - Does this scenario have the potential to violate the institution’s honor code, code of conduct, or honesty policy?
 - Does this scenario affect the way other people are treated?

Things that are morally neutral:

- Grades
- Taking 12 hours vs. 15 hours
- Withdrawing from/retaking a class
- Going to tutoring
- Taking a semester off
- Accepting a job offer with a higher or lower starting salary
- Changing majors

Things that are not morally neutral:

- Collaborating on an assignment without permission
- Not contributing to a group project
- Having someone else complete your work for you
- Posting answers to test questions online without permission
- Plagiarism

How can we use moral neutrality in advising practice?

- An example: Jamie
 - Historically high-achieving student, earned a failing grade on a final project for class
 - Team project, 15% of final grade
 - Reduced her final grade from an A- to a B
 - Professor offers Jamie the option of taking an incomplete grade and completing an individual project for additional credit

Identifying Benefits and Presenting Options

- In this scenario, Jamie has 2 options:
 - 1. Take the incomplete and complete an individual project for additional credit
 - 2. Take the final grade of B and end her semester
- Let's identify the benefits of both options:
 - Option 1: Jamie gets a chance to improve her grade for one more in line with what she feels she earned. No guarantees, but she has the potential to have a resulting GPA of 3.86 with an A- in the course.
 - Option 2: Jamie can decide not to complete the extra project, accept the B, and have a resulting GPA of 3.82 since she has already completed a high number of hours. She can close the book on this class and not have to think about it over her winter break.

Empowering and affirming student choice

- Neither of these options is right or wrong. It's morally neutral.
 - Decisions are much more often right or left than they are right or wrong.
- Our job in these scenarios is not to lead the student to a particular choice. It is to present options and benefits that allow the student to make an informed choice based on the benefits they most want.
- Keys to remember:
 - Keep an unbiased tone. Make a conscious effort not to favor some options over others with your voice.
 - Allow the student freedom of choice, even if they choose an option you wouldn't.
 - Affirm the student's choice. Instead of "I think you made the right choice," try "I think you are making a good choice."

Additional Examples

- What options and benefits can you identify?
 - A student wants to add a double major, and it would take them 2 additional semesters to complete the program.
 - A student has two internship offers, one with a well-known, reputable company, and one with a new start-up company.
 - A traditionally high-achieving student has been preparing for their final exam for 2 weeks. Their professor's last review session is scheduled for a night when the student has tickets to see their favorite band.
 - A student's family responsibilities have kept them from attending class regularly. Based on their grades so far, the student believes they will earn a final grade of C in the class. The withdrawal deadline is coming up.

Addressing the Core Issues

- 2 common student experiences:
 - Decision-making paralysis
 - Hyperfixation on performance outcomes
- Get the question of character out of the way.
- Prioritize personal well-being, empower their version of success.
- Deescalate distress, refocus on student goals.
- Our “best” is fluid.

Moral Neutrality as a Student Advocacy Tool

- Using your influence
 - Many are quick to assume that students are lazy, irresponsible, and entitled.
 - These assumptions can cause student suffering in some cases.
 - If you, as the advisor, have more information, how can you advocate for your student?
 - Understand, and encourage others to understand, that a diverse population of students needs a variety of resources to accomplish goals.
- Advocacy might look like:
 - Emailing a professor on a student's behalf to ask for leniency on a deadline given a student situation.
 - Working with the Disability Resource Center to help a student receive certain accommodations.
 - Giving students the benefit of the doubt, and encouraging others to do the same.

Shame is the enemy of functioning.

- The root issue is a mindset of shame.
- If a student feels that lower grades, taking time off, or not doing the absolute most makes them a lesser person, they are probably worried about what other people will think. Peers, parents, professors, etc.
- Shame leads students to want to slip away.
 - Creates anxiety
 - Discourages reaching out for help
- Our job is to be the voice that reminds them it's morally neutral.

THANK YOU!

References:

Davis, K. C. (2020). *How to keep house while drowning: 31 days of compassionate help*. KC Davis, LPC.

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