

Artificial Intelligence in Counseling and Counseling Psychology: A Counselor-Led Framework for Ethical Practice & Training

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Abstract

As generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT become increasingly accessible, counseling psychologists are exploring their potential use in clinical practice, often without clear guidance or ethical frameworks. This paper presents a counselor-led model for integrating generative AI tools into counseling practice. Grounded in ethical principles, the model emphasizes human oversight, transparency, and client-centered care. A case study illustrates the application of this model with a veteran receiving counseling services through the Veterans Health Administration. The case demonstrates how generative AI can support foundational career counseling tasks (i.e., career exploration and career planning), while maintaining full counselor oversight. Key ethical considerations are discussed, including

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transparency and informed consent, data privacy and security, accuracy and bias, and human oversight and professional judgment. This work contributes to the emerging literature on AI-assisted counseling by offering an ethically grounded and practice-oriented model for counseling professionals interested in engaging with these technologies responsibly.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, AI, ChatGPT, career counseling, AI-assisted counseling

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Significance of the Scholarship to the Public

This article presents a counselor-led framework for integrating generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools into counseling practice. Such guidance is essential for preparing counseling professionals to manage ethical and practical risks associated with AI use. The framework presented in this article emphasizes ethical use of AI in practice and ensures professional oversight at every step in the process.

The integration of technology in counseling practice is expanding rapidly, driven by the advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI) systems built on large language models (LLM) such as OpenAI's ChatGPT. While research shows that generative AI has limitations and safety concerns when used alone in mental health treatment (Acevedo et al., 2025; APA, 2025; Bernstein et al., 2025; Dergaa et al., 2024), studies also suggest it can be a valuable tool when paired with human oversight. For instance, researchers and practitioners have highlighted generative AI tools' potential in psychiatry to aid in diagnosing and treatment planning (Arbanas, 2024), developing theoretical conceptualizations and interpretations in psychotherapy (Raile, 2024), providing psychoeducation in response to various mental health concerns (Maurya et al., 2025), and facilitating skill building to reduce anxiety (Alanzi et al., 2024). Although much of the current (and limited) discourse focuses on generative AI's role in mental health contexts (Kolding et al., 2024), its application in career counseling remains underexplored.

Eminent vocational scholar Lent (2025) examined potential transformations in career counseling practices with the advent of LLMs. Lent highlights numerous potential applications for generative AI in career counseling, including its use in clinical practice. He indicates that while more complex career-related

concerns still require human intervention (e.g., navigating relational discord, emotional distress, or overcoming socio-environmental obstacles), many components of career counseling such as career exploration, planning, and specific task support like resume writing, interview preparation, and job searching may be efficiently completed by generative AI tools (Lent, 2025). This is notable considering that these foundational elements of career counseling practice—career exploration, career planning, and job-searching—can be time-intensive and require extensive knowledge of a vast array of unique and interwoven occupational resources (Barros-Bailey, 2021; Truthan, 2021). In his exploration of how ChatGPT would respond to career-related questions such as “What sort of education do I need to be a career counselor?” and “What college majors could lead to careers where I can make the most money?”, among others, Lent (2025) reported, “I had no difficulty getting immediate and largely plausible replies” (p. 564). This underscores the potential utility of generative AI tools for supporting some career-related tasks, thus freeing-up counselors to address more complex client issues that are most effectively addressed by trained professionals.

Building on Lent’s (2025) exploration of generative AI in career development, this paper offers practical strategies for integrating generative AI tools into career counseling, thereby filling a counselor education and training gap that others have identified as a barrier to the ethical and productive use of AI in clinical practice (Ma et al., 2024; Maurya & DeDiego, 2025). This paper does not advocate for the universal adoption of generative AI in personal or clinical practice. Rather, this paper aims to provide guidance for those who are interested in, or are already experimenting with, generative AI tools in their counseling practice. This paper also does not suggest that generative AI tools like ChatGPT serve as the “counseling professional”, a point that is made clear in the “Framework for Ethical and Effective AI Use in Career Services” guidance document (National Career Development Association [NCDA], 2025). Instead, this paper outlines how generative AI tools can aid in the counseling process when used thoughtfully and ethically by trained counseling professionals.

This paper starts with an overview of generative AI, followed by best practices for engaging with these tools as well as a review of ethical considerations, including a review of a stepwise framework for using generative AI in counseling practice that maintains human oversight at each step (see Figure 1). After laying this groundwork, a generative AI-assisted case demonstration for a client receiving career exploration and planning services (e.g., the purposeful gathering of information about self and work; Stumpf et al., 1983) is presented. This paper ends with a discussion of the challenges and limitations of using generative AI tools in counseling, as well as future directions for research and training.

increasingly popular. Although numerous versions of generative AI tools exist (e.g., Google's Gemini, Microsoft's Copilot), OpenAI's ChatGPT is often considered the most popular (Marr, 2024). ChatGPT is publicly available and can be accessed online for free (or through paid subscription) on OpenAI's website or can be downloaded as a mobile app. Lent (2025) describes tools like ChatGPT as "automated interfaces, found on websites, devices, and social media platforms, that come in several forms" (p. 564). ChatGPT defines itself as:

A type of generative artificial intelligence (AI) developed by OpenAI that produces human-like text in response to user input. As a generative AI system, it creates novel content rather than simply retrieving or classifying existing information. ChatGPT is based on the Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) architecture, which uses deep learning techniques to identify patterns in language and produce contextually relevant responses. The model is trained on extensive text data from diverse sources, enabling it to generate coherent and contextually appropriate text across a wide range of topics (OpenAI, 2025).

Counselors affiliated with large healthcare systems, such as Veterans Affairs (VA) or academic institutions may also have access to their own generative AI tools, which may have the added benefit of being HIPAA compliant. The best practices, ethical considerations, and clinical scenarios presented in this paper apply to all generative AI tools. Once an individual has established access to a conversational AI application (either publicly available or through affiliation with an institution), they are able to start having "conversations" with this tool.

Getting the Most out of Generative AI Tools

Familiarization and Exploration. Importantly, professional codes of ethics indicate that psychologists and counseling professionals need to be adequately trained (i.e., striving for competence, pursuing continuing education, seeking consultation) in the use of generative AI tools before implementing them in clinical practice (APA, 2025; NCDA, 2025). As a starting point, counseling professionals who are interested in using generative AI conversational tools in their practice should begin by using these applications in a casual, non-clinical way. For someone completely new to generative AI tools, you may consider typing a prompt into a conversational AI tool such as "I'm new to using ChatGPT, provide detailed instructions on how to get started using this tool."

Counselors should also explore, outside of their clinical work, how the generative AI system may respond to “common” counseling prompts (e.g., questions or topics that may be routinely searched online in typical counseling practice). For example, counselors providing career related services may already be accustomed to typing into a Google search “social, enterprising jobs” to conduct job research with, or on behalf of, a client. What’s different about generative AI tools such as ChatGPT is that they will likely provide a narrative response to such a search term with interpretation of intentions, as opposed to identifying relevant internet resources to your search question/statement (Google now even features an “AI Overview” at the top of their search results which offers a summary narrative using generative AI similar to what other generative AI conversational tools offer). For example, when typing “social, enterprising jobs” into ChatGPT, it asks for clarification of the meaning of the prompt, then provides examples of social, enterprising type occupations accompanied by a brief definition, and ends with a recommended follow-up question to keep the conversation moving “do you want to put together a list of specific real-world social enterprises and the jobs they post?” (OpenAI, 2025). The question presented by ChatGPT highlights that generative AI may misinterpret the intention of a prompt. In this case, ChatGPT suggested identifying jobs in “social enterprises,” when the intention may have been to find social-enterprising Holland-type jobs. This leads to important points about becoming familiar with generative AI tools: clearer and more precise prompts will lead to better output.

Prompt Crafting. Clinicians who use ChatGPT in their practice note that the output is dependent on the specificity of the entered prompt (Arbanas, 2024). This is confirmed by recent research finding that providing ChatGPT with greater detail about a client’s symptoms led to higher-rated exposure hierarchies for obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD; Bernstein et al., 2025). According to OpenAI’s (2025) help page, good prompts for LLMs are “clear and specific,” which they define as providing “enough context for the model to understand what you are asking. Avoid ambiguity and be as precise as possible to get accurate and relevant responses” (OpenAI, 2025).

As counseling professionals explore generative AI tools, they will likely learn how to improve their prompts through trial and error (i.e., entering a prompt, reviewing the output, entering a prompt in a different way, comparing the output, and so on). As generative AI technology improves, the need for such detailed prompts may change and the recommendations on what constitutes a “good, detailed” prompt may also change. However, it may still be helpful to have guidance on what a detailed prompt looks like.

Common advice when crafting a good prompt for generative AI platforms includes: (a) naming the persona that the generative AI should replicate (i.e., “respond like a career counselor”), (b) describing the specific task at hand in as much detail as possible, (c) describing the context for which you are making the request, which may include providing examples or describing the goals or desired outcomes, and (d) explaining the desired format you’d like the output presented (Collins, 2025). With this prompting framework in mind, the previous example prompt of “social, enterprising jobs” is insufficient. A clearer and more specific prompt may read something like the following:

“Act as a career counselor who provides job information to clients (persona). Provide 50 occupational pathways for a person with social and enterprising Holland’s career interests and explain why each occupation fits (task). I plan to use this information to develop a handout for college students that I see for career counseling support (context). Use simple, clear and professional language that is easily understood by college-aged, young adults” (format).

Entering this more detailed prompt into ChatGPT results in a brief definition of social and enterprising jobs and personality types followed by a list of 50 specific occupations with a brief job description. ChatGPT organized this list across five broad occupational categories: “Business & Leadership,” “Education & Training,” “Health & Human Services,” “Government,” “Law, & Advocacy,” and “Communication & Service” (OpenAI, 2025). This response from ChatGPT may or may not meet the desired intent of the counselor, in which case, following up with additional questions or points of clarification in an iterative or conversational fashion are necessary and recommended.

Iterative Engagement. According to OpenAI (2025), it is best to take an “iterative approach” when using ChatGPT, which they describe as “breaking up complex workflows with multiple tasks into separate, follow-up prompts can lead to better results. Treat prompting as a conversation: refine your requests based on initial answer and keep experimenting.” Clinicians have described asking generative AI conversational tools questions like “Can you expand on this?” or “Can you tell me more?” as well as providing new data or information as useful follow-up to obtain further detail from the initial prompt (Arbanas, 2024).

Building off the example above—in which ChatGPT was prompted to provide information about 50 social, enterprising type occupations—a counselor may have wanted to follow-up by stating: “provide three to five

relevant resources (e.g., online tools or organizations) for each of the 50 occupations that a client could utilize in their career development.” When this follow-up prompt is entered, ChatGPT recommended starting with the first 10 occupations (so as not to have an overwhelming output), and provides a bulleted list of specific professional organizations, training sites, job-search engines, and career exploration tools for the first 10 occupations (OpenAI, 2025). The output concluded with an offer to do the same process for the remaining 40 occupations and creating a master spreadsheet or PDF handout. A response of “yes” to this offer would lead to further output as well as a downloadable Excel and PDF document that can be saved to the counselor’s computer.

In sum, becoming familiar with generative AI tools, learning to craft detailed prompts, and engaging in iterative, conversational dialogue are foundational skills for using these tools. This groundwork sets the stage for a meaningful and responsible integration of generative AI into practice. However, before applying this technology in counseling settings, it is essential to examine the following critical ethical issues: transparency and informed consent, data privacy and security, accuracy, bias, and misinformation, and human oversight and professional judgment.

Ethics of Using Generative AI in Clinical Practice

The legal and ethical landscape surrounding AI use in counseling is still evolving, and counselors must be proactive in understanding the potential risks. As with any new technology, responsibility lies with the counselor to ensure ethical use. Competence in using generative AI is part of ethical practice, and counselors must seek training and supervision as needed to use these tools responsibly (Alanzi et al., 2024; Carlbring et al., 2023). The American Psychological Association (APA, 2025) and the National Career Development Association (NCDA, 2025) have both issued preliminary guidance on the ethical use of AI in practice. These professional guidelines, along with recommendations offered in the literature, provide initial ethical guidance to counseling professionals interested in using generative AI tools to assist in their practice. Below is a synthesis of the central ethical considerations.

Transparency and Informed Consent. Transparency regarding clinical processes, such as techniques used by a counselor and expectations of the counseling process, is a foundational ethical obligation, and it becomes especially critical when integrating AI tools like ChatGPT into practice. According to the NCDA (2024) Code of Ethics Section F.8.b. (“Informed

Consent when using New & Emerging Technology”), “professionals are transparent, inform clients, and obtain consent whenever they use new and emerging technology when providing services” (pp. 20-21). Thus, it is important that counseling professionals clearly disclose to all relevant parties (e.g., clients, supervisors, administrators, guardians, etc.) when and how generative AI is being used in their work. This includes naming the specific tool (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, etc.), explaining its purpose, and outlining both its potential benefits and limitations. As with any intervention, the counselor is responsible for ensuring that clients understand what they are consenting to and that their autonomy is respected throughout the process (APA, 2025; Carlbring et al., 2023).

Informed consent about a counselor’s use of generative AI should be obtained prior to use, ideally in writing, and should be communicated in a manner that is developmentally and culturally appropriate for the client. Counselors should consider literacy levels, languages used by their clients, and any other relevant cultural factors that may require additional strategies for ensuring that individuals are fully aware of the counselor’s intention to use ChatGPT and the risks and benefits of this approach. Clients should additionally be informed of their right to opt out of AI-assisted interventions and be offered alternative approaches. This may also involve informing clients about who to contact with concerns. Carlbring et al. (2023) additionally highlight how not knowing what has or has not been produced by AI, or believing something was produced by a counselor and later learning it was produced by ChatGPT, can lead to a client’s distrust in the therapeutic process. Thus, it is important that counselors clearly inform their clients when they are presenting them with material that was developed (either fully or in part) by a generative AI tool, even if clients had already consented to the use of generative AI tools.

Data Privacy and Security. The use of generative AI in counseling practice raises concerns about data privacy and security. Counseling professionals should stay informed about how data is stored, processed, and protected by the generative AI provider by reviewing relevant privacy policies and terms of use as well as any published Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). According to the NCDA (2024) Code of Ethics Section F.8.b. (“Informed Consent when using New & Emerging Technology”), “professionals do not enter any client information into an Artificial Intelligence (AI) platform without express consent” (p. 21). Using generative AI tools may involve a third-party platform that may not be HIPAA compliant. Thus, counselors should not enter personally identifiable or sensitive client information into nonsecure systems. If possible, counseling professionals should use

institutionally approved or HIPAA-compliant versions of generative AI tools. Even if such HIPAA compliant tools are available, best practice includes deidentifying client data by removing any personally identifiable information (PII) or other relevant personal characteristics that could be linked back to a specific person. In the context of career counseling, specifically, counselors should avoid prompting generative AI tools using specific company names, job titles, names of specific universities or colleges attended, or specific years and dates (e.g., dates when a client is employed in a certain type of job) that could link the information back to the client. When using generative AI tools, it's imperative that counselors minimize the amount of information shared and always ensure that the information provided maintains client confidentiality.

Counseling professionals are additionally expected to safeguard copyrighted materials such as clinical assessments (APA, 2017). Many assessment tools counselors use are copyrighted, and these materials should never be copied and pasted into generative AI tools as doing so may result in loss of control over the copyrighted material. Uploading components of copyrighted material, including scoring tables and algorithms, manual language, or specific test items should also be avoided. Counseling professionals should seek clear understanding of the copyright agreements for the material that they use in their clinical practice and refrain from entering this material into a generative AI tool without explicit permission from the copyright holder.

Accuracy, Bias, and Misinformation. Generative AI poses a risk of misinformation, which emphasized the need for counselors to critically evaluate all output produced by these systems before applying it in practice (APA, 2025; NCDA, 2025). As Lent (2025) recommends, counselors should verify the accuracy of AI generated material and develop skills in processing the information with clients in a thoughtful and collaborative manner. Just as counselors are expected to understand the development and norming of various assessments tools (APA, 2017; NCDA, 2010, 2024), they should also seek to understand the data sources and limitations of generative AI. As such, ethical use of generative AI tools requires that the counseling professional has enough competence on the topic to evaluate the accuracy of the output that is generated. Thus, counselors should not use generative AI in ways that extends beyond their scope of practice. Ultimately, the counseling professional, not the AI tool, is responsible for the quality and integrity of the information used in practice.

Importantly, generative AI systems, are trained on large datasets that may reflect societal biases and inequities. In career counseling, this can manifest in

subtle ways such as reinforcing gendered occupational roles, under-representing certain career paths for marginalized groups, or offering advice that aligns with dominant cultural norms. Counselors must critically evaluate AI-generated content for potential bias and consider how it may impact clients from diverse backgrounds. This includes being aware of how prompts are framed, how responses are interpreted, and how recommendations are contextualized.

To address these concerns, counselors should engage in critical self-reflection regarding how their own social and cultural identities influence both prompt development and interpretation of generative AI output. In a career counseling context, for example, a counselor from a privileged cultural group (e.g., White, middle-class, man) may subconsciously prioritize achievement and success over work-life balance, which may influence prompt development (e.g., asking generative AI to suggest “high-paying, prestigious career” when a client has not indicated this as a valued goal) and favoring outputs that reinforce those values. Engaging in critical reflexivity will help uncover counselor blind spots when using AI tools that may perpetuate bias and impose the counselor’s worldview over the client’s.

Testing prompts in informal, nonclinical contexts can help counselors identify potential biases and refine their approach. Counselors should strive for neutrality in the prompts they develop and may consult colleagues, or even the generative AI tool itself (e.g., request feedback from the generative AI tool on the neutrality of the prompt), to ensure that their own positionality is not influencing generated outputs. Co-creating prompts with clients can help ensure that the client’s goals and worldview are accurately represented. Finally, counselors can play a proactive role in promoting equity by generating prompts that reflect diverse identities and career goals, thereby contributing to more inclusive data patterns over time (APA, 2025). This could take the form of submitting feedback to developers on biased output, as well as using inclusive language and culturally relevant values in prompts.

Human Oversight and Professional Judgement. Generative AI tools should never replace the professional judgment of a counselor (APA, 2025; NCDA, 2025). Human oversight is critical for ensuring that AI-generated content is used ethically, appropriately, and in alignment with a client’s goals and values (Alanzi et al., 2024; Carlbring et al., 2023). Counselors must remain actively engaged in the counseling process, using their clinical expertise to interpret AI outputs, guide decision-making, and maintain the therapeutic alliance. APA (2025) recommends that clinicians have clearly defined entry points in which human oversight is provided and further notes that providers “remain responsible for final decisions and must not blindly rely on AI-generated

recommendations.” It would likely be helpful to document rationale for using AI tools, including how the counselor was involved at each step of the process.

Framework for Human Oversight in Counseling Practice. To support ethical integration of AI in counseling, this paper proposes a cyclical framework to guide practice (see [Figure 1](#)). In this cyclical framework, there are clear points of human intervention at each step in the process, which ensures that counselors themselves, are always the buffer between the client and generative AI. As depicted in this framework, the process initiates with the counselor gathering relevant information from the client to serve as the basis for a generative AI prompt (Step 1). This may include information gathered as part of a structured interview or during the counseling process, or through formal assessments.

After prompting the generative AI tool using deidentified information (Step 2), the counselor evaluates the acceptability (i.e., the appropriateness) of the output attained (Step 3). [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the broad areas of evaluation at this step. This evaluation is not about revising or editing the output, but rather determining whether the response aligns with the counselor’s intent, the client’s goals, and the overall direction of the therapeutic process, and thus if reprompting or follow-up is needed. If the output is unacceptable, the counselor needs to address this issue. To evaluate the acceptability of the output, the counselor considers: alignment with the original intent of the prompt, the conceptual usefulness of the output, any obvious ethical concerns with the information attained, and ease of

Table 1. Considerations for Evaluating the Acceptability of Initial Generative AI Output

Evaluation focus	Example questions to consider
Intent alignment	Does the output reflect the purpose of the prompt? Is the output addressing the right issue or goal for the client?
Usefulness	Is there something in the output that could be helpful, even if it needs refinement? Does the output offer a new perspective or idea worth exploring?
Ethical red flags	Are there any immediate concerns with the output (e.g., harmful advice, bias, misinformation) that would require discarding or reprompting?
Feasibility for revision	Is the output something I can work with and revise, or is it fundamentally off-base?

integrating the output into the counseling space. Unacceptable output should be addressed by either gathering more information from the client to produce more acceptable output, or reprompt the generative AI tool if new information from the client is not needed.

Once a counselor determines that the output obtained is acceptable, the counselor then revises the output (Step 4). Table 2 provides an overview of key revision areas to consider. At this step, the counselor critically engages with the output to prepare it for actual client use. This involves tailoring the language to match the client’s needs and background, ensuring that the information is clear and accessible, and reflects a therapeutic tone. The counselor fact checks any resources or information provided in the output to ensure accuracy. Any definitive-type language should be edited so that it has an open, exploratory, or flexible stance.

After editing the output, the counselor brings the counselor-edited version of the AI-generated content into the counseling space (Step 5). As is true with good career assessment feedback, rather than presenting the AI generated information as definitive or prescriptive, the counselor frames it as a set of possibilities or hypotheses to be critically examined. Through discussion, the counselor helps clients process the suggestions, including identifying what resonates versus what is misaligned. The counselor approaches the conversation with awareness to the client’s context, and ensures that the use of AI bolsters, rather than overrides, the

Table 2. Areas of Revision before Presenting Generative AI Output to Client

Revision areas	Key actions
Accuracy	Verify the veracity of the output and remove any erroneous or incorrect information.
Personalization	Tailor output to the client’s context, goals, and needs.
Tone	Adjust for warmth, respect, and therapeutic alignment of output. Ensure the output supports autonomy and avoids prescriptive or directive language.
Clarity & simplicity	Remove jargon, simplify complex ideas, and ensure readability of output.
Cultural sensitivity	Revise for inclusivity and remove assumptions or bias in output.
Clinical framing	Add context or interpretive guidance for how the output will be used in session.
Transparency	Clearly identify content that has been generated via generative AI.

client's agency. New information gathered through the course of this discussion may be used to generate new prompts, thus initiating the cyclical process of using generative AI in practice.

Case Demonstration and Analysis

The following section offers a clinical case study illustrating the use of Veterans Affairs (VA) ChatGPT (a secure, institutionally approved, HIPAA compliant version of ChatGPT used within VA) to assist in a career counseling process. The case study follows the framework depicted in this paper. This particular case comes from the clinical practice of the author of this paper, a counseling psychologist who provides career-related services to veterans through the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The identifying demographics and background features of the client have all been modified to protect the individual's confidentiality.

Client Background and Presenting Concern

Henry is a 29-year-old, married, White, cis-gendered Man. He is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force and is service connected (receiving VA disability payments) for a depressive disorder. He lives in a transitional housing residence and is in recovery from a stimulant use disorder. He has a high school diploma, and attended some college, though he never completed a bachelor's degree. He has been unemployed for approximately one year, and is interested in pursuing employment that is "interesting and meaningful." Henry reports that he is "stuck," and is not sure what direction to pursue because he has too many vocational interests. He is also concerned about his sobriety, and wants to ensure that any employment path he pursues will ultimately support his primary goal of sustained sobriety.

At the onset of the counseling process, Henry was informed about the nature of counseling and the use of VA ChatGPT during the process. This informed consent included a review of the purpose of using VA ChatGPT as a tool to assist in generating career ideas, exploring job pathways, and developing plans to reach career goals. Following this overview, a thorough conversation ensued about what VA ChatGPT does, the potential benefits, potential risks and limitations, confidentiality and privacy, the counselor's role in the process, as well as Henry's rights to decline use of VA ChatGPT. Henry was provided ample opportunity to ask questions and demonstrated understanding of how VA ChatGPT would be used in the counseling process.

Step 1. Gathering Relevant Client Information

The initial work with Henry included gathering a comprehensive review of his work history, vocational dreams and aspirations, strengths, interests, values, and relevant barriers. Through this information gathering phase, Henry described having spent years in the Air Force working as an Electrical Power Production Specialist. He reported that he loved this work because of the hands-on nature of repairing electrical equipment and the need for constant problem solving and troubleshooting. He described years of career advancement in the military, including moving into more administrative positions but found these roles less enjoyable because it took him away from the hands-on task of actually doing the repair work. Henry went on to describe how his substance use got out of hand while he was in the administrative role. Around this time, Henry experienced legal consequences related to substance use, which led to him leaving the military. Since that time he has held a variety of temporary maintenance-type positions and has been receiving treatment for substance use. Henry reports that he would like to get back to a government position using his electrical power repair skills but worries about his resume gaps and his ability to sustain sobriety when working. Henry says he is open to retraining or pursuing further education if needed, but isn't sure what program he would pursue if he were to get further education. In addition to his legal history, Henry notes several other factors he is considering when planning his next steps: (a) he believes he needs to make at least \$20/hour to sustain his preferred lifestyle, and (b) he needs to balance "getting bored easily but also taking on too much and burning out...both can lead to me using." Henry completed a Holland's Self-Directed Search (SDS) and had the following results: Realistic (43), Enterprising (41), Social (34), Conventional (33), Investigative (33), and Artistic (30). Henry also completed the Work Importance Locator (WIL) and had the following results: Achievement (30), Support (26), Recognition (18), Working Conditions (15), Relationships (14), and Independence (12).

Step 2. Entering Relevant Context into ChatGPT

With Henry's involvement, a deidentified summary of his background was co-created. The goal of creating this summary was to ensure that VA ChatGPT had enough of the most important context (e.g., preferences, psychosocial context, and practical constraints) about Henry while maintaining his confidentiality. Co-developing this summary served as a narrative intervention for Henry (i.e., he distilled down pertinent components of his personal vocational trajectory), while upholding ethical principles of using

AI in practice in a person-centered manner (i.e., transparency, data privacy, human oversight). This summary removed all personal demographics and identifying information regarding his past experiences that were not relevant for Henry's career exploration, planning, and decision-making processes (e.g., exact job titles, years employed in certain jobs, length of unemployment, age, gender identity, etc.). The summary developed is as follows:

I'm a veteran of the air force and am currently unemployed. I'm not sure what career path to pursue. I want a meaningful and interesting job. I have years of work experience in electrical repair work that I really enjoyed. I advanced into a supervisory role in electrical repair but did not enjoy this as much because I prefer actually repairing things myself, versus supervising. My top Holland SDS scores are Realistic (43), Enterprising (41) and Social (34), and my top Work Importance Locator scores are Achievement (30), Support (26), and Recognition (18). I am also recently sober and am worried about a job triggering me to use substances. I get bored easily, and that can lead to using, but if I'm moving too quickly, I get stressed easily, and that also leads to using. I have a previous arrest related to substance use. I worry that arrest may impact my job options. I have completed some college coursework and am open to further education. I'm very interested in government jobs and need to make at least \$20 per hour.

Henry's summary was included in a prompt that followed best practices, incorporating persona, task, context, and format. The prompt was crafted to ask for career paths that align with Henry's interests, values, strengths, and needs while avoiding environments that may trigger urges to use substances. See [Supplemental Material](#) for the complete prompt entered into VA ChatGPT.

Step 3. Critically Evaluating the Output

The initial output was evaluated for its acceptability. It was determined that the information was generally as expected and, at face value, appeared aligned with the goals of career exploration. The output appeared helpful in presenting feasible options with plausible rationale. There did not appear to be any ethical red flags with the original output and the information seemed well positioned to be integrated into clinical practice. However, three key limitations were noted with the initial output (based on clinical judgment), requiring further prompting. First, it was noted that the VA ChatGPT output did not explicitly map each identified career path with a Holland interest code or WIL values. A follow-up prompt asked VA ChatGPT to provide this information. Second, it was noted that all occupations identified required less than a bachelor's degree. Although these entry level positions may align with

Henry's current qualifications, it was important to give Henry options that also include advanced education (e.g., a Bachelor's degree) as a potential next step for advancement. This was viewed as a potential bias, in that the recommended occupations were reinforcing an occupational social position. Thus, a follow-up prompt asked VA ChatGPT to provide career pathways requiring bachelor's degrees in order to provide Henry with further options and opportunities. Finally, given Henry's explicit interest in government jobs, a follow-up prompt asked VA ChatGPT to provide information on the likelihood of each identified career path leading to government employment (see [Supplemental Material](#) for these prompts and the output).

Step 4. Revising Output

Once the evaluation of the output was complete, clinical judgment was used to revise and edit the information to meet Henry's needs. Some career pathways that were suggested by VA ChatGPT were removed (Henry was worried about having so many options that he became overwhelmed, thus, only those pathways that were deemed most aligned with Henry's goals were included). Specific details, including salary information, Holland codes, and WIL values were verified using O*NET online and other job-related online resources. The output was incorporated onto a client-friendly worksheet that clearly indicated that the information was derived from VA ChatGPT and should not be interpreted as definitive or prescriptive, but rather as information for exploration.

Step 5. Presenting and Discussing the Output with the Client

The initial presentation of the VA ChatGPT output was led with an explicit conversation about the nature of the output, and framing the usefulness of the information as facilitating further conversation and exploration of potential career pathways. Through discussion, Henry processed his reactions to the output, including identifying information that was clearly misaligned with his preferences and needs, as well as identifying pathways he'd like to have further information about. Henry identified two pathways he was most interested in pursuing: electronic engineering technician and wind turbine technician. With this new information gathered, Henry co-created a new prompt asking for specific 3-, 6-, and 12-month plans for attaining these career goals, which reset the cycle (Step 1) of this stepwise process of VA ChatGPT assisted counseling support.

With clearly established career goals and plans, the majority of work with Henry focused on sustaining progress (e.g., developing self-regulation,

cultivating a positive self-image), enhancing motivation (e.g., narrative construction, critical consciousness raising, motivational interviewing), and implementing behavioral activation strategies (e.g., behavioral planning, community outreach activities) to enact his valued plan. These interventions were viewed as better suited to human-based interventions, versus an AI intervention. Henry concluded counseling after 14 sessions, once he began feeling more confident and agentic in his vocational life, which was evidenced to him through sustained progress in his career development (e.g., he enrolled in necessary placement tests, submitted training and job applications, and conducted interviews). Counseling concluded with a discussion of when a return to counseling may be indicated.

Discussion

This paper demonstrates a step-by-step process for integrating generative AI in a way that is completely counselor led that helped to facilitate positive client outcomes. By following the model presented in this case, a counselor is able to reap the benefits of generative AI technology in their sessions (e.g., rapid generation of career exploration resources) while maintaining high ethical standards (APA, 2025; NCDA, 2024, 2025). In this case, VA ChatGPT served as a supportive resource, complementing the counselor's expertise, rather than replacing the counselor all together.

The use of VA ChatGPT was clinically helpful in multiple ways. First, the output produced by VA ChatGPT led to thorough and tailored career information that supported the client's self-reflection and decision-making. These benefits align with prior research suggesting that access to detailed, personalized career information is a critical component of career counseling practice (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000; Whiston et al., 2005). Though this case study focuses on career exploration and planning, there are likely other counseling and career-related tasks that ChatGPT could assist (e.g., resume development, job-searching; Lent, 2025; case conceptualization and treatment planning, Raile, 2024, among others). Secondly, using VA ChatGPT appeared to reduce the time the counselor needed to spend on resource gathering and conducting career research, allowing more time for therapeutic tasks such as developing coping skills, including reducing self-blame through critical consciousness raising, motivational interviewing, and behavioral activation. This aligns with Lent (2025) who suggested that generative AI tools may contribute to more efficient service delivery allowing counselors to focus on more complex tasks. Although VA ChatGPT was helpful for foundational elements of career counseling (exploration and planning, Jiang et al., 2019; Stumpf et al., 1983), the counselor's role in filtering, framing, and

facilitating discussion was likely essential to Henry's career planning and eventual career progression.

The counselor managed potential risks in this case in multiple ways. First, he familiarized himself with his institution's generative AI tool in advance, paying particular attention to the developer's privacy policies to ensure understanding about data security. Second, the counselor maintained transparency and informed consent with the client by thoroughly discussing how generative AI would be used in their counseling process. Third, the counselor co-developed the material to be entered into the generative AI tool with the client, which promoted transparency and mitigated the risk of bias in the output stemming from the counselor's own positionality. Although the generative AI tool used in this case was HIPAA compliant, no personal demographic or identifying information was entered, which mitigated the risks associated with confidentiality and data privacy. Fourth, the counselor reviewed and revised the output before sharing the information with the client, which managed the risk for misinformation and ensuring that counselor oversight was maintained at all times. This included reprompting the AI tool to produce additional output when initial suggestions were limited and potentially biased (e.g., output only recommending careers that did not require advanced education or training). Finally, when presenting AI generated material to the client, the counselor explicitly named the material as co-created using AI tools, both verbally and in writing. This helped manage risks to transparency during the counseling process.

Challenges and Limitations

As a single case study, this paper does not provide evidence of effectiveness. Although the integration of VA ChatGPT appeared to enhance efficiency and support client outcomes, it also introduced new demands on the counselor. These included developing skills in becoming familiar with generative AI, preparing for a discussion of informed consent about its use, crafting effective prompts, critically evaluating AI-generated content, and revising outputs for clinical use. These skills are not emphasized in counselor training and thus require focused effort to develop. As such, the use of generative AI may initially increase workload and require additional time investment, particularly for practitioners unfamiliar with these tools. Moreover, the perceived benefits of generative AI (improved time management, enhanced client engagement, ability for counselor to attend to more complex counseling needs) remains speculative in the absence of empirical data. Finally, it is possible that the use of AI introduces new risks, such as overreliance on

AI-generated content or the inadvertent reinforcement of bias, if not used thoughtfully and ethically.

Future Directions

Future work should aim to address the challenges and limitations of AI assisted counseling practice. For example, empirical research is needed to evaluate the impact of generative AI systems on counseling process (e.g., does generative AI improve counselors' efficiency?) and outcomes (e.g., does AI-assisted counseling improve pertinent outcomes?). Mixed-methods studies, including randomized controlled trials and qualitative interviews, could provide valuable insights into both the benefits and limitations of AI-assisted counseling. Additionally, counseling psychology programs may consider incorporating foundational training in AI and its clinical application, including ethical considerations, prompt design, and critical evaluation of AI-generated content. To structure this training effectively, programs could adopt a tiered approach beginning with reflexivity and advocacy as the foundation, ensuring trainees critically examine their own cultural identities, biases, and values before engaging with AI tools. These conversations may be had in core counseling psychology courses focused on multicultural competence and diversity, as well as other introductory professional development spaces. Organizations such as Partnership on AI (PAI) offer blogs and resources on AI bias, fairness, and inclusion that counseling psychology educators could use as discussion points for promoting reflexivity and advocacy. Building on this first tier, a second tier of training could focus on knowledge and ethical use of AI, including core concepts and components of AI, its limitations, and legal and ethical frameworks. These topics could be integrated into existing ethics courses, supported by resources from professional organizations like APA and NCDA, which are actively developing helpful resources for the ethical use of AI such as ethical frameworks, case studies, continuing education, practical tool kits, and compliance guides. Finally, a third tier could emphasize application and skill-building training, including supervised practice in prompt design, bias detection, and integration of AI outputs into counseling interventions. These components could be embedded in more applied courses (e.g., counseling and interviewing skills, clinical assessment, vocational psychology, and strength-based counseling, etc.) and reinforced through supervised practicum experiences. For hands-on skills, counseling psychology educators can draw upon published frameworks, such as the five-step model offered in this article, as well as practical guidance published by AI developers like

OpenAI and Microsoft. This tiered approach to training could help prepare future practitioners to use generative AI tools responsibly and effectively (Ma et al., 2024; Maurya & DeDiego, 2025). Finally, professional organizations such as APA and NCDA should continue to refine and expand their guidelines for the ethical use of generative AI in counseling. As AI technology evolves, clear standards of practice will be essential to support safe, equitable, and client-centered AI-assisted counseling practice.

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The data can be made available upon request from the corresponding author.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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