

# Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions

**bacp**

British Association for  
**Counselling & Psychotherapy**

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# Our commitment to clients

Clients need to be able to participate freely as they work with practitioners of the counselling professions towards their desired goals. This requires clients to be able to trust their practitioner with their wellbeing and sensitive personal information. Therefore, as members or registrants of BACP, we take being trustworthy as a serious ethical commitment. We have agreed that we will:

## 1. Put clients first by:

- a. making clients our primary concern while we are working with them

## 2. Work to professional standards by:

- a. working within our competence
- b. keeping our skills and knowledge up to date
- c. collaborating with colleagues to improve the quality of what is being offered to clients
- d. ensuring that our wellbeing is sufficient to sustain the quality of the work
- e. keeping accurate and appropriate records

## 3. Show respect by:

- a. valuing each client as a unique person
- b. protecting client confidentiality and privacy
- c. agreeing with clients on how we will work together
- d. working in partnership with clients

## 4. Build an appropriate relationship with clients by:

- a. communicating clearly what clients have a right to expect from us
- b. communicating any benefits, costs and commitments that clients may reasonably expect
- c. respecting the boundaries between our work with clients and what lies outside that work
- d. not exploiting or abusing clients
- e. listening out for how clients experience our working together

## 5. Maintain integrity by:

- a. being honest about the work
- b. communicating qualifications, experience and working methods accurately
- c. working ethically and with careful consideration of the law

## 6. Demonstrate accountability and candour by:

- a. being willing to discuss with clients any known risks involved in the work and how best to work towards our client's desired outcomes
- b. ensuring that clients are promptly informed about anything important that has gone wrong in our work together, whether or not clients are aware of it, and quickly taking action to limit or repair any harm as far as possible
- c. reviewing our work with clients in supervision
- d. monitoring how clients experience our work together and the effects of our work with them

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# Ethics

1. Our ethics are based on values, principles and personal moral qualities that underpin and inform the interpretation and application of *Our commitment to clients* and *Good practice*.

## Values

2. Values are a useful way of expressing general ethical commitments that underpin the purpose and goals of our actions.
3. Our fundamental values include a commitment to:
  - Respecting human rights and dignity
  - Alleviating symptoms of personal distress and suffering
  - Enhancing people's wellbeing and capabilities
  - Improving the quality of relationships between people
  - Increasing personal resilience and effectiveness
  - Facilitating a sense of self that is meaningful to the person(s) concerned within their personal and cultural context
  - Appreciating the variety of human experience and culture
  - Protecting the safety of clients
  - Ensuring the integrity of practitioner-client relationships
  - Enhancing the quality of professional knowledge and its application
  - Striving for the fair and adequate provision of services.
4. Values inform principles. They become more precisely defined and action-orientated when expressed as a principle.

## Principles

5. Principles direct attention to important ethical responsibilities. Our core principles are:
  - Being trustworthy:** honouring the trust placed in the practitioner.
  - Autonomy:** respect for the client's right to be self-governing.
  - Beneficence:** a commitment to promoting the client's wellbeing.
  - Non-maleficence:** a commitment to avoiding harm to the client.
  - Justice:** the fair and impartial treatment of all clients and the provision of adequate services.
  - Self-respect:** fostering the practitioner's self-knowledge, integrity and care for self.
6. Ethical decisions that are strongly supported by one or more of these principles without any contradiction with the others may be regarded as well-founded.

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7. However, practitioners may encounter circumstances in which it is impossible to reconcile all the applicable principles. This may require choosing which principles to prioritise. A decision or course of action does not necessarily become unethical merely because it is controversial or because other practitioners would have reached different conclusions in similar circumstances. A practitioner's obligation is to consider all the relevant circumstances with as much care as possible and to be appropriately accountable for decisions made.

## Personal moral qualities

8. Personal moral qualities are internalised values that shape how we relate to others and our environment. They represent a moral energy or drive which may operate unconsciously and unexamined. This moral energy or drive is ethically more beneficial when consciously examined from time to time and used to motivate our ethical development or shape how we work towards a good society.
9. 'Personal moral qualities' are a contemporary application of 'virtues' from moral philosophy.
10. The practitioner's personal and relational moral qualities are of the utmost importance. Their perceived presence or absence will have a strong influence on how relationships with clients and colleagues develop and whether they are of sufficient quality and resilience to support the work.
11. High levels of compatibility between personal and professional moral qualities will usually enhance the integrity and resilience of any relationship.
12. Key personal qualities to which members and registrants are strongly encouraged to aspire include:

- Care:** benevolent, responsible and competent attentiveness to someone's needs, wellbeing and personal agency.
- Diligence:** the conscientious deployment of the skills and knowledge needed to achieve a beneficial outcome.
- Courage:** the capacity to act in spite of known fears, risks and uncertainty.
- Empathy:** the ability to communicate understanding of another person's experience from that person's perspective.
- Identity:** sense of self in relationship to others that forms the basis of responsibility, resilience and motivation.
- Humility:** the ability to assess accurately and acknowledge one's own strengths and weaknesses.
- Integrity:** commitment to being moral in dealings with others, including personal straightforwardness, honesty and coherence.
- Resilience:** the capacity to work with the client's concerns without being personally diminished.
- Respect:** showing appropriate esteem for people and their understanding of themselves.

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**Sincerity:** a personal commitment to consistency between what is professed and what is done.

**Wisdom:** possession of sound judgement that informs practice.

## Conclusion

13. The challenge of working ethically means that practitioners will inevitably encounter situations that require responses to unexpected issues, resolution of dilemmas, and solutions to problems. A good understanding of the ethics that underpin our work is a valuable resource which is helpful in making significant decisions. The use of an ethical problem-solving model and discussion about ethics are essential to good practice. This *Ethical Framework* is intended to assist practitioners by directing attention to the variety of ethical factors that may need to be taken into consideration and to identify alternative ways of approaching ethics that may prove more useful.
14. No statement of ethics can eliminate the difficulty of making professional judgements in circumstances that may be constantly changing and full of uncertainties. By accepting this statement of ethics, members and registrants of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy are committing themselves to engaging with the challenge of striving to be ethical, even when doing so involves making difficult decisions or acting courageously.



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# Good practice

1. As members of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) we are committed to sustaining and advancing good practice.
2. This section of the *Ethical Framework* looks behind *Our commitment to clients* and *Ethics* to consider their implications for *Good practice* in more detail.
3. It sets out what can be expected of all members and registrants of BACP as practitioners providing therapeutically-based services, particularly coaching, counselling, pastoral care and psychotherapy. This includes associated roles in supervision, education or training, management and research.
4. As members and registrants of BACP, we have committed ourselves to the principles and values set out in this *Ethical Framework* and recognise that our membership or registration may be at risk if we fail to fulfil our commitments.
5. Our responsibilities are set out as full or qualified obligations. We are fully and unconditionally committed to fulfilling a specific requirement of *Good practice* where we state 'we will...' or 'we must...'. Where we consider a requirement may need to be varied for good ethical reasons, we state that 'we will usually...'.
6. We are committing ourselves to being openly accountable and willing to explain how we have implemented any of these obligations to people with a valid interest in our work.

## Putting clients first

7. We will make each client the primary focus of our attention and our work during our sessions together.
8. Any professional or personal interests that conflict with putting a client's interests first will be carefully considered in consultation with a supervisor, an independent experienced colleague or, when appropriate, discussed with the client affected before services are offered.
9. We will give careful consideration to how we manage situations when protecting clients or others from serious harm or when compliance with the law may require overriding a client's explicit wishes or breaching their confidentiality – see also 25 and 54.
10. When the safeguarding of our clients or others from serious harm takes priority over our commitment to putting our clients' wishes and confidentiality first, we will usually consult with any client affected, if this is legally permitted and ethically desirable. We will endeavour to implement any safeguarding responsibilities in ways that respect a client's known wishes, protect their interests, and support them in what follows.

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**11.** We share a responsibility with all other members of our professions for the safety and wellbeing of all clients and their protection from exploitation or unsafe practice. We will take action to prevent harm caused by practitioners to any client – see also 24.

**12.** We will do everything we can to develop and protect our clients' trust.

### Working to professional standards

**13.** We must be competent to deliver the services being offered to at least fundamental professional standards or better.

**14.** We will keep skills and knowledge up to date by:

- a. reading professional journals, books and/or reliable electronic resources
- b. keeping ourselves informed of any relevant research and evidence-based guidance
- c. discussions with colleagues working with similar issues
- d. reviewing our knowledge and skills in supervision or discussion with experienced practitioners
- e. regular continuing professional development to update knowledge and skills
- f. keeping up to date with the law, regulations and any other requirements, including guidance from this Association, relevant to our work

**15.** We will keep accurate records that are appropriate to the service being provided.

**16.** We will collaborate with colleagues over our work with specific clients where this is consistent with client consent and will enhance services to the client.

**17.** We will work collaboratively with colleagues to improve services and offer mutual support.

**18.** We will maintain our own physical and psychological health at a level that enables us to work effectively with our clients – see 75 Self-care.

**19.** We will be covered by adequate insurance when providing services directly or indirectly to the public.

**20.** We will fulfil the ethical principles and values set out in this *Ethical Framework* regardless of whether working online, face to face or using any other methods of communication. The technical and practical knowledge may vary according to how services are delivered but all our services will be delivered to at least fundamental professional standards or better.

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## Respect

21. We will respect our clients' privacy and dignity.
22. We will respect our clients as people by providing services that:
  - a. endeavour to demonstrate equality, value diversity and ensure inclusion for all clients
  - b. avoid unfairly discriminating against clients or colleagues
  - c. accept we are all vulnerable to prejudice and recognise the importance of self-inquiry, personal feedback and professional development
  - d. work with issues of identity in open-minded ways that respect the client's autonomy and be sensitive to whether this is viewed as individual or relational autonomy
  - e. make adjustments to overcome barriers to accessibility, so far as is reasonably possible, for clients of any ability wishing to engage with a service
  - f. recognise when our knowledge of key aspects of our client's background, identity or lifestyle is inadequate and take steps to inform ourselves from other sources where available and appropriate, rather than expecting the client to teach us
  - g. are open-minded with clients who appear similar to ourselves or possess familiar characteristics so that we do not suppress or neglect what is distinctive in their lives
23. We will take the law concerning equality, diversity and inclusion into careful consideration and strive for a higher standard than the legal minimum.
24. We will challenge colleagues or others involved in delivering related services whose views appear to be discriminatory and take action to protect clients, if necessary – see 11.
25. We will protect the confidentiality and privacy of clients by:
  - a. actively protecting information about clients from unauthorised access or disclosure
  - b. informing clients about any reasonably foreseeable limitations of privacy or confidentiality in advance of our work together
26. We will do all that we reasonably can to ensure that our clients are participating on a voluntary basis. Hesitant clients or clients who feel under pressure from other people or agencies to work with us will have their reservations acknowledged and taken into account in how services are offered.
27. We will work with our clients on the basis of their informed consent and agreement.

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28. Careful consideration will be given to working with children and young people that:

- a. takes account of their capacity to give informed consent, whether it is appropriate to seek the consent of others who have parental responsibility for the young person, and their best interests
- b. demonstrates knowledge and skills about ways of working that are appropriate to the young person's maturity and understanding

29. We will give careful consideration to obtaining and respecting the consent of vulnerable adult clients, wherever they have the capacity to give consent, or involving anyone who provides care for these clients when appropriate.

30. Our work with clients will be based on professional partnerships with them that aim to increase their wellbeing, capability and/or performance.

### Building an appropriate relationship

31. We will usually provide clients with the information they ought to know in advance in order to make an informed decision about the services they want to receive and how these services will be delivered.

32. We will give careful consideration to how we reach agreement with clients and contract with them about the terms on which our services will be provided. Attention will be given to:

- a. reaching an agreement or contract that respects each client's expressed needs and choices
- b. communicating terms and conditions of the agreement or contract in ways easily understood by the client and appropriate to their context
- c. stating any reasonably foreseeable limitations to a client's confidentiality or privacy
- d. providing the client with a record or easy access to a record of what has been agreed
- e. keeping a record of what has been agreed and of any changes or clarifications when they occur

33. We will establish and maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries in our relationships with clients by ensuring that:

- a. these boundaries are consistent with the aims of working together and beneficial to the client
- b. any dual or multiple relationships will be avoided where the risks of harm to the client outweigh any benefits to the client
- c. reasonable care is taken to separate and maintain a distinction between our personal and professional presence on social media where this could result in harmful dual relationships with clients
- d. the impact of any dual or multiple relationships will be periodically reviewed in supervision and discussed with clients when appropriate. They may also be discussed with any colleagues or managers in order to enhance the integrity of the work being undertaken

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34. We will not have sexual relationships with or behave sexually towards our clients, supervisees or trainees.
35. We will avoid having sexual relationships with or behaving sexually towards people whom we know to be close to our clients in order to avoid undermining our clients' trust in us.
36. We will not exploit or abuse our clients in any way: financially, emotionally, physically, sexually or spiritually.
37. We recognise that conflicts of interest and issues of power or dependence may continue after our working relationship with a client, supervisee or trainee has formally ended. We will exercise caution before entering into personal or business relationships with former clients and expect to be professionally accountable if the relationship becomes detrimental to the former client or the standing of the profession.
38. We will periodically review each client's progress and, when practicable, seek our client's views on how we are working together.

### **Integrity**

39. We will maintain high standards of honesty and probity in all aspects of our work.
40. We will be as open and as communicative with our clients, colleagues and others as is consistent with the purpose, methods and confidentiality of the service.
41. Whenever we communicate our qualifications, professional experience and working methods, we will do so accurately and honestly. All reasonable requests for this information will be answered promptly.
42. We will give conscientious consideration to the law and any legal requirements concerning our work and take responsibility for how they are implemented – see also 14f, 23 and 60.
43. We will promptly notify this Association about any criminal charges, disciplinary procedures or civil claims brought against us, or where we are in sufficient financial difficulty to be declared bankrupt or have entered into other types of debt relief or insolvency arrangements.
44. We will avoid any actions that will bring our profession into disrepute.

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### Accountability and candour

45. We will take responsibility for how we offer our clients opportunities to work towards their desired outcomes and the safety of the services we provide or have responsibility for overseeing.
46. We will discuss with clients how best to work towards their desired outcomes and any known risks involved in the work.
47. We will ensure candour by promptly informing our clients of anything important that has gone wrong in our work together, and:
  - a. take immediate action to prevent or limit any harm
  - b. repair any harm caused, so far as possible
  - c. offer an apology when this is appropriate
  - d. notify and discuss with our supervisor and/or manager what has occurred
  - e. investigate and take action to avoid whatever has gone wrong being repeated
48. We will review in supervision how we work with clients – see 50–61.
49. We will monitor how clients experience our work together and the effects of the work with them in ways appropriate to the type of service being offered.

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## Supervision

50. Supervision is essential to how practitioners sustain good practice throughout their working life. Supervision provides practitioners with regular and ongoing opportunities to reflect in depth about all aspects of their practice in order to work as effectively, safely and ethically as possible. Supervision also sustains the personal resourcefulness required to undertake the work.
51. Good supervision is much more than case management. It includes working in depth on the relationship between practitioner and client in order to work towards desired outcomes and positive effects. This requires adequate levels of privacy, safety and containment for the supervisee to undertake this work. Therefore a substantial part or preferably all of supervision needs to be independent of line management.
52. Supervision requires additional skills and knowledge to those used for providing services directly to clients. Therefore supervisors require adequate levels of expertise acquired through training and/or experience. Supervisors will also ensure that they work with appropriate professional support and their own supervision.
53. All supervisors will model high levels of good practice for the work they supervise, particularly with regard to expected levels of competence and professionalism, relationship building, the management of personal boundaries, any dual relationships, conflicts of interest and avoiding exploitation.
54. All communications concerning clients made in the context of supervision will be consistent with confidentiality agreements with the clients concerned and compatible with any applicable agency policy.
55. Careful consideration will be given to the undertaking of key responsibilities for clients and how these responsibilities are allocated between the supervisor, supervisee and any line manager or others with responsibilities for the service provided. Consideration needs to be given to how any of these arrangements and responsibilities will be communicated to clients in ways that are supportive of and appropriate to the work being undertaken. These arrangements will usually be reviewed at least once a year, or more frequently if required.
56. Trainee supervision will require the supervisor to ensure that the work satisfies professional standards.
57. When supervising qualified and/or experienced practitioners, the weight of responsibility for ensuring that the supervisee's work meets professional standards will primarily rest with the supervisee.

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58. Supervisors and supervisees will periodically review how responsibility for how work with clients is implemented in practice and how any difficulties or concerns are being addressed.
59. The application of this *Ethical Framework* to the work with clients will be reviewed in supervision regularly and not less than once a year.
60. Supervisors will conscientiously consider the application of the law concerning supervision to their role and responsibilities.
61. We also recommend supervision to anyone providing therapeutically-based services, working in roles that require regularly giving or receiving emotionally challenging communications, or engaging in relationally complex and challenging roles.

### **Training and education**

62. All trainers will have the skills, attitudes and knowledge required to be competent teachers and facilitators of learning for what is being provided.
63. Any information about the teaching, education or learning opportunities being provided will be accurate and enable potential students to make an informed choice.
64. Any selection of students will be fair, respectful and transparent to candidates and use procedures designed to select suitable students.
65. Any assessments of students will be fair, respectful and provide reasoned explanations for the outcome to the students.
66. Clients will usually be informed when they are receiving their services from a trainee.
67. All providers of training and education will model high levels of good practice in their work, particularly with regard to expected levels of competence and professionalism, relationship building, the management of personal boundaries, any dual relationships, conflicts of interest and avoiding exploitation.



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## Research

68. We value research and systematic inquiry by practitioners as enhancing our professional knowledge and providing an evidence-base for practice in ways that benefit our clients.
69. We will usually support and provide opportunities for research if it is compatible with the services we provide.
70. When undertaking research we will be rigorously attentive to the quality and integrity of the research process, the knowledge claims arising from the research and how the results are disseminated.
71. All research that we undertake will conform to the *BACP Ethical Guidelines* for researching counselling and psychotherapy.
72. All participants in research will do so on the basis of explicit informed consent.
73. All research will be reviewed in advance to ensure that the rights and interests of participants have been considered independently of the researcher.
74. The research methods used will comply with standards of good practice in any services being delivered and will not adversely affect clients.

## Care of self as a practitioner

75. We will take responsibility for our own wellbeing as essential to sustaining good practice by:
  - a. taking precautions to protect our own physical safety
  - b. monitoring our own psychological and physical health
  - c. seeking professional support and services as the need arises
  - d. keeping a healthy balance between our work and other aspects of life

## Responding to ethical dilemmas and issues

76. We recognise that professional and ethical issues, problems and dilemmas will arise from time to time and are an unavoidable part of our practice.
77. We will use our supervision and any other available professional resources to support and challenge how we respond to such situations. We will give careful consideration to the best approaches to ethical problem-solving.
78. We will take responsibility for considering how best to act in such situations and will be ready to explain why we decided to respond in the way we did.