

Ethically responsible practice

“The concept of ethics relates to moral consideration. The challenge lies in what is considered moral or ethical. Each counsellor comes to the profession with their own set of values and standards. Individual principles and how they were used to interpret dilemmas would be universally different. A Code of Ethics — a general standard that counsellors and therapists adhere to and use co jointly with legal standards to provide ethical practice and work through ethical dilemmas — is required” Australian Institute of Professional Counsellors [AIPC], 2009.

A number of laws govern all Australian workplaces. Ethical behaviour in the counselling profession is however unregulated. Counsellors can independently register with professional organisations that provide guidelines of ethical standards and behaviour.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is an ethical requirement of the counselling relationship (Australian Institute of Professional Counsellors, 2010b). Counsellors must provide relevant resources and information to clients so they understand what it is the services intends to provide. With this knowledge, clients have the freedom to choose whether to enter into or remain in a counselling relationship (Australian Psychological Society, 2007).

Empowering and developing trust in clients can be promoted by educating them about their rights and responsibilities. This includes imparting information about the goals of bereavement counselling; the responsibilities of the counsellor towards the client; the client’s responsibilities; the limitations of, and exceptions to confidentiality; legal and ethical parameters that may be a part of the process; the qualifications and background of the counsellor; and the fees involved (Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement [ACGB], 2017).



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The two main Australian registration bodies and their codes of ethical behavior:

Psychotherapy and counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA]. [Interim Code of Ethics 2015.](#)

Australian Counselling Association [ACA]. [Code of Ethics and Practice 2012](#)

Dignity and respect

One of the fundamental values of counselling is to respect human rights and dignity (PACFA, 2015). Counsellors must accept and promote each individual for who they are in relation to one's lifestyle, culture, appearance, religious belief, style of dress, where they live, income, etc. Respect must also be shown by accepting varying views on how things should be in the world, how people should act in certain circumstances and how the important aspects of life are handled (e.g. money, family, relationships, power, male and female roles, etc.). Clients have the right to make their own choices and decisions and do things their way as long as they bring no harm to others (ACGB, 2017).



Duty of care

Counsellors are responsible for providing a safe environment for the clients – particularly because physical and psychological safety is a premise for the counselling therapy to succeed and to cause no harm (AIPC, 2010a). They must use their skills and knowledge to the best of their ability to ensure the best possible outcomes for clients.

Duty of care also requires counsellors to adhere to legislation that governs all Australian workplaces, for example, providing a discrimination-free workplace and abiding by workplace health and safety requirements. It is necessary to be familiar with policies and implement procedures relating to Australian workplace laws.

Principles

Values inform principles. They represent an important way of expressing an ethical commitment that becomes more precisely defined and action-orientated when expressed as a principle (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2010).

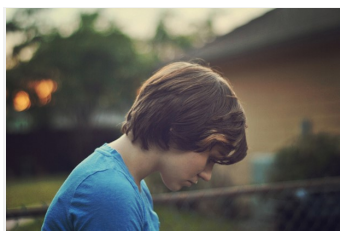
Five of the moral principles that should guide counsellors' decision making outlined by Corey, Corey and Callanan (2004) include:

- **Autonomy:** Autonomy promotes self-determination. Counselling support includes fully informing clients of their choices and giving them the freedom to choose which way to go.
- **Nonmaleficence:** refers to counsellors' behaviors and interactions that consciously avoid doing any harm. Any potential risk of causing harm must be identified and minimized.
- **Beneficence:** Counsellors must take actions to benefit clients. While remembering to respect individuality, supporting clients' growth and learning will positively affect their well-being.
- **Justice:** Bereavement services must be offered fairly and equally to all clients regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status, religion or sexuality.
- **Fidelity:** A counsellor must make decisions that enable them to honour their commitment to each client. The client can therefore trust the counsellor will carry out their role outlined at the commencement of service. This relates to confidentiality, truthfulness, clear boundaries and prioritising the client's best interests.

Boundaries

Counsellors are responsible for setting boundaries within the counselling relationship and will need to make clear to the client that counselling is a formal contract and nothing else. They will practice a high level of fidelity within the boundaries of an appropriate client/counsellor relationship. Service must not exploit clients, past or present, financially, sexually, emotionally or any other way (PACFA, 2015).

Counsellors should consider that the deeper the involvement with the client's emotional life during counselling, the less likely is the possibility of a subsequent equal relationship following termination of therapy. Counsellors must seek professional supervision should any attempt to build a relationship with a former client be considered (PACFA, 2015).



Dual relationships

Dual relationships between counsellors and clients represent a conflict of interest and should be avoided if they can be reasonably foreseen and prevented. They may lead to enmeshment of relationship boundaries, misuse of power, and impaired professional judgement, resulting in harming the client (PACFA, 2015). Examples of such relationships include, but are not limited to, familial, social, financial, business, or close personal relationships with clients.

When a dual relationship cannot be avoided, counsellors must take appropriate precautions to ensure clear and realistic boundaries are implemented. Seeking supervision can ensure judgement is not impaired and power is not being misused. As Corsini (2000) discusses (as cited in AIPC, 2010b) the main question to be asked is how much influence particular interactions would have in professional relationship. Simple interactions are likely to have little influence over both individuals' mindsets, thus it is generally not perceived as a challenging situation. But certain situations which induce emotional attachment can be damaging to counselling goals and/or outcomes.



Self disclosure

Self-disclosure refers to an intentional technique a counsellor uses to share their own personal views or experience with a client with the purpose of improving the client's counselling experience (AIPC, 2006). It is used for the sole purpose of helping the client, and not to meet a counsellor's needs. The counsellor should be direct, brief, focused and relevant. Corey (1996) explains (as cited in AIPC, 2006), the counsellor must be careful not to share too much about themselves, thus taking the focus of therapy off the client, but also avoid being so passive, by listening and reflecting, that they miss opportunities to build rapport and leaving the client feeling that their counsellor does not empathise with them.

Confidentiality

Limits to confidentiality

If risk of harm or danger to a client, counsellor or others is identified, confidentiality may be broken to access assistance (ACA, 2012; PACFA, 2015). After consultation with a supervisor, a counsellor may use appropriate channels to report concerns and seek follow up services. Where possible the client should be informed of the counsellor's need to break confidentiality.

Possible referral services included but are not limited to:

- In an emergency request an ambulance and police ph. 000
- Suicide helpline 1300 651 51
- Psychiatric triage (information, assessment and referral for Victoria) 24/7 ph. 1300 792 977.
- Suicide call back service ph. 1300 659 467
- Carers Victoria www.carersvictoria.org.au/
- Local mental health service, for example, for the south region of Melbourne, Victoria: Peninsula Health Mental Health Service, Frankston 3199 ph. (Initial Contact/Referral): 1300 792 77 ah. 1300 792 977
- Child Protection Authority in their jurisdiction, for example, Victoria Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Child Protection or Child First. www.dhs.vic.gov.au

Counsellors have an ethical responsibility to maintain strict confidentiality with regards to verbal, written, recorded or computer stored personal information obtained from or about clients (ACA, 2012; PACFA, 2015). Clients' autonomy must be protected at all times. It is the duty of the counsellor to discuss the level and limits of confidentiality with clients, ensuring they understand. A confidentiality contract should be signed prior to commencement of counselling. Agreements continue after counselling had ended and even after a client's death unless there are overriding legal considerations (ACA, 2012; PACFA, 2015). Confidentiality is central to developing a respectful, trusting therapeutic relationship and if it compromised it can diminish the effectiveness of counselling (Henry, 2011).



Privacy

Ethical conduct in counselling is not yet part of Australia's legal framework, however *The Privacy Act (1988)* and the *Freedom of Information Act (1982)* govern practices in *all* Victorian workplaces.

Counsellors must only collect, use and retain personal information necessary for effective service and only for as long as required by law. Counsellors will maintain privacy in creating, storing, accessing, transferring, and disposing of counselling records that are written, taped, video-taped, computerised or in any other form.

Counsellors need to inform clients about the kind of records that will be made and access to personal information must be limited to those with a legitimate reason for accessing that information. Personal information must only be used for the purposes in which it was originally intended. Written permission must be sought if information needs to be used for a varied purpose.

In line with the *Freedom of Information Act (1982)*, counsellors must recognise that counselling records are kept for the benefit of the client, and provide the client access upon reasonable request. In the spirit of partnership, information should also be shared with relevant organisations where it is in the best interests of the individual to do so, subject to informed consent by the client.

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Legislation

Freedom of Information Act (1982)

The Privacy Act (1988)