

Introduction to Ethics in Counselling

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Key concepts, guiding principles, and practical applications for professional practice

1. Why Ethics Matter in Counselling

Reason	Explanation
Protect Clients	Safeguards dignity, privacy, and well-being.
Maintain Professional Integrity	Builds trust, credibility, and public confidence in the profession.
Guide Decision-Making	Provides a framework for handling dilemmas and ambiguous situations.
Legal Compliance	Aligns practice with statutory regulations and licensing requirements.

2. Core Ethical Principles (Universal)

Principle	Core Idea	Typical Application
Autonomy	Respect clients' right to make informed choices.	Informed consent; allowing clients to set goals.
Beneficence	Act in the best interest of the client.	Offering interventions that are evidence-based and likely to help.
Non-maleficence	Do no harm.	Avoiding dual relationships, recognizing limits of competence.
Justice	Fair and equitable treatment.	Providing services without discrimination; equitable fee structures.
Fidelity	Loyalty and trustworthiness.	Maintaining confidentiality; keeping promises.
Integrity	Honesty and transparency.	Accurate record-keeping; disclosing conflicts of interest.

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3. Major Ethical Codes (Overview)

Organisation	Primary Document	Notable Features
American Counseling Association (ACA)	<i>ACA Code of Ethics</i>	Detailed sections on confidentiality, dual relationships, and cultural competence.
British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP)	<i>Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions</i>	Emphasis on self-awareness and reflective practice.
Australian Counselling Association (ACAus)	<i>Code of Ethics</i>	Strong focus on client safety and professional boundaries.
International Association for Counselling (IAC)	<i>International Ethical Guidelines</i>	Provides cross-cultural guidance for global practice.

All codes share common themes: confidentiality, competence, professional boundaries, and client welfare.

4. Key Ethical Topics

4.1 Confidentiality & Privacy

- **Definition:** Keeping client information private unless consent is given or a legal exception applies.
- **Legal Exceptions (examples):**
 - Imminent risk of harm to self or others.
 - Child/elder abuse reporting.
 - Court orders/subpoenas.
- **Practical Tips:**
 - Explain limits of confidentiality at the first session.
 - Use secure storage (encrypted files, locked cabinets).
 - Obtain written consent before sharing records.

4.2 Informed Consent

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- **Components:**
 1. Nature and purpose of counselling.
 2. Expected benefits and possible risks.
 3. Session length, fees, and cancellation policy.
 4. Rights to withdraw at any time.
- **Process:** Discuss verbally, provide a written document, and confirm understanding.

4.3 Dual Relationships & Boundary Management

- **Definition:** Any non-professional relationship that could impair judgment (e.g., friend, business partner, romantic).
- **Risk:** Power imbalance, exploitation, loss of objectivity.
- **Management Strategies:**
 - Avoid dual roles whenever possible.
 - If unavoidable (e.g., small community), disclose the situation, obtain informed consent, and document the decision.

4.4 Competence & Scope of Practice

- **Self-Assessment:** Regularly evaluate knowledge, skills, and cultural competence.
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