

COUNSELLING SKILLS AND STUDIES

FIONA BALLANTINE DYKES ● BARRY KOPP ● TRACI POSTINGS
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DR ANTHONY CROUCH

2ND
EDITION



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1

Using Counselling Skills Ethically and Safely

This first chapter is concerned with safety; working in a way that is safe both for the person using counselling skills (the helper) and the person being helped (the helpee). It is ethically important to work safely.



But what do we mean by 'safe' and what do we mean by 'ethically' in this context?

ETHICS AND SAFETY



Let's start with safety. In the dictionary, the definition of safe is:

Protected from or not exposed to danger or risk; not likely to be harmed or lost.
(*Oxford English Dictionary*)

A 'safe' is also where we put valuables; a place that affords protection.

REFLECTION

- Who do you feel safe with?
- What skills and qualities does that person have that help you feel safe?
- Where do you feel safe?
- Make a list of what you would need in order to create a 'safe space' to talk to someone about something personal.



There is a strong link between working ethically and working safely, although they are not the same. One definition of ethics is:

Moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity.
(*Oxford English Dictionary*)



It sounds simple. But how do I know what the right thing to do is?



Professional bodies such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) place great importance on working ethically and safely because part of their role is to protect the public. This is particularly important in the field of counselling because people seeking help are often in a vulnerable state. The BACP has developed the Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions (2016) which helps practitioners think about what the right thing to do is.

The BACP Ethical Framework doesn't tell you what to do because no two situations are ever exactly the same, but it helps practitioners think about the right thing to do by offering some *ethical principles* for counselling and psychotherapy. These principles are:

- **being trustworthy** – honouring the trust placed in you (also called fidelity)
- **autonomy** – respecting a person's right to make their own choices
- **beneficence** – acting in the best interests of the person
- **non-maleficence** – not doing any harm
- **justice** – being fair and impartial
- **self-respect** – having integrity, self-knowledge and taking care of yourself.



Some big words ... but I think I get it.



So, although the document is for counsellors and psychotherapists, it is also really helpful for people who use counselling skills when thinking about doing what is right – what is ethical and safe. We will look more closely at the Ethical Framework as we go along ...



Stop! What exactly is the difference between a counsellor and someone who uses counselling skills?



This is a good question which gets to the heart of working ethically and safely.

KNOWING YOUR LIMITS

A *counsellor* is someone who is fully trained to work therapeutically with clients within a coherent framework of underpinning knowledge, theory and skills which

informs the way they work. The counsellor and the client agree a formal contract to work together for the explicit purpose of helping the client. It takes at least four years to train to be a counsellor and there are a number of different theoretical approaches and counselling models which inform the nature and content of the training.

Some examples of counsellors are:

- a counsellor in a GP practice
- a Relate counsellor
- a school counsellor
- a counsellor in private practice.

A person *using counselling skills* is not a fully trained counsellor but someone who has learned some general counselling skills (mainly listening and supporting skills) which they use to enhance or complement another professional or voluntary role. People also learn counselling skills as the first step in training towards becoming a counsellor.

Some examples of people who use counselling skills in other roles are:

- Nurses
- Teachers
- Parents
- Teaching assistants
- Pastoral assistants
- Line managers
- Dieticians
- Health care workers
- Support workers

Counselling is just one role in a wide array of supportive relationships. Most people who suffer emotional or psychological distress never get to see a trained counsellor but many will be helped by people who use counselling skills as part of another role. Counselling skills are sometimes called 'helping skills' because they are used in lots of formal and informal helping roles and in many different settings. Helpers who use counselling skills provide meaningful and lasting psychological support and contribute significantly to the well-being and mental health of the public.

EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE USING COUNSELLING SKILLS

Laura works in the Human Resources (HR) department of a large company. An employee comes in to ask for unpaid leave. He breaks down as he explains that his wife has left him and he is trying to manage the crisis both personally and in terms of child

(Continued)

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care. Laura uses counselling skills to listen to him and support him as part of her HR role but recommends that he sees a counsellor through the Employee Assistance Programme.

Steve is a youth worker. A 15-year-old boy at the youth centre is reluctant to go home at the end of the evening. Steve uses counselling skills to help him talk about what's going on at home. From what the boy says, there is no immediate risk of him being harmed so Steve agrees to talk with him each week within his role as youth worker. He lets him know that there is further help and support available if needed.

Mel meets a friend after work. Her friend is frantic, having got drunk and kissed a colleague at work. She is confused about her feelings and what this means for her marriage. Mel uses counselling skills to help her explore these issues. At the end of their meeting, her friend is feeling relieved and ready to face things.

One way we can make the difference between counsellors and those who use counselling skills clearer is in the language that we use in training:

- A person using counselling skills is often called the 'helper' and the person they are 'helping' is the 'helpee'.
- A fully trained person is called a 'counsellor' who enters into a contract for counselling with the 'client'.



What does all this have to do with working ethically and safely?



It's important that you understand the difference between counselling and helping work because you need to recognise the limits of your ability and not mislead others about your level of training. In other words, although you might have all sorts of other skills you must make it clear to others that as far as counselling goes you have learned counselling skills but are not a trained counsellor. Table 1.1 lists the differences between a helper and a counsellor.

TABLE 1.1 Differences between helper and counsellor

What is a helper?	What is a counsellor?
A helper uses counselling skills within different roles to enable an individual to start to express what is going on for them in a listening capacity and explore different avenues of professional support as required.	A counsellor is a qualified professional trained to work at a depth with individual issues.
A helper may have other relationships with the client, e.g. co-worker, line manager.	A counsellor is most likely to only have a professional role as counsellor with the individual client.
The helping role is on a more informal basis where boundaries are agreed.	A counsellor will have a formal, legal, contractual agreement with the client.

 tip

When a helper works with a helpee, it is usually called a 'helping session', a 'helping interaction' or a 'helping conversation'. The word 'session' can be confusing as it is used for both helping work and counselling work. However, a 'helping session' might be a 'one-off' short meeting of about 10–15 minutes which is agreed at the time of the session, whereas counselling sessions are usually part of a pre-arranged series of meetings which are at a set time and typically 50–60 minutes in length.

a useful ... conversation can take place within about eight to ten minutes. This length of time represents a typical window of opportunity that a teacher, doctor or manager may have to allow someone to talk through something that is troubling them ... there are many situations in which longer periods of time may be available ... but it is nevertheless important to recognise that a 10-minute talk can make a difference. (McLeod and McLeod, 2011: 2)

- It's important for your well-being to ensure you are not out of your depth or overwhelmed or put at risk as this would be unethical and unsafe for you.
- It's important for the person you are helping so that they do not have unrealistic expectations or a false impression of who you are and what you can offer. This would make it unsafe and unethical for them.

Look back at the list of ethical principles and think about which ones would be broken if you did not make the limits of your ability clear to a person seeking help.

REFLECTION

Go to a gym or sports centre. Try to pick up the heaviest weights there. Unless you are very fit you will not be able to do this.

Reflect on what stops you picking up the heaviest weight straight away. What would you need to do to be able to pick up the heaviest weight?

This activity is a good analogy for the limits of your ability. You cannot pick up the heaviest weight because you haven't practised and started on lighter weights and worked towards lifting heavier ones. With more experience and practice, you would be able to pick up heavier weights. Also, by trying to lift weights too heavy for you, you could hurt yourself or cause an accident that hurts someone else.

Similarly, when you first begin learning and practising counselling skills, you do not have the knowledge and experience to work with in-depth emotional and psychological distress and might cause harm to yourself or the person you are working with. However, as you learn and gain understanding and knowledge, the limits of your ability will change and you will be able to continue to work safely and appropriately according to your level of training and experience.



Now that you have investigated the ethical principles in the BACP Ethical Framework, have a look at the ‘personal moral qualities’ needed for working in this field. How many of these overlap with your list of what qualities you would look for in a person who makes you feel safe? Why do you think ‘courage’ might be an important quality for a counsellor?

ACTIVITY

Reflect on each of the personal moral qualities shown in Figure 1.1.

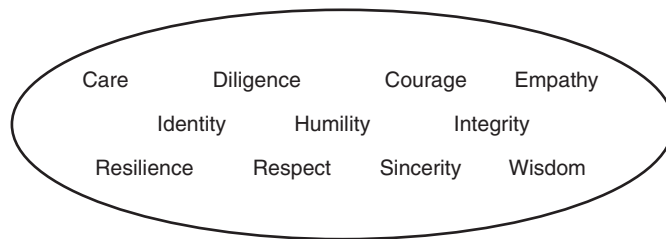


FIGURE 1.1 BACP Ethical Framework – personal moral qualities

- How would you honestly score yourself out of 10 against this list of moral qualities?
- Are any of the scores you have given yourself less than six?
- How might this affect your suitability to work as a counsellor or as someone in a helping role?

You might want to write down your scores so you can look at them later in your training. It might be interesting to see how they change as time goes by and what factors contribute to this change.



I notice that there seems to be an overlap between the moral qualities and the ethical principles. For example, if I act with ‘integrity’ I suppose I must also be ‘trustworthy’ because if I was not trustworthy I could not act with integrity. Or could I?

Or another example: if I work with ‘care’, I will also do no harm (non-maleficence). But how do I know if I am working with ‘care’ or ‘diligence’? Does it also mean that if someone needs help and support that I am not trained to offer, I have to say I can’t help them and send them somewhere else in case I do them harm? This demonstrates my commitment to ‘care’ for the helpee and ‘diligence’ about not working beyond my own skills and knowledge to ensure a good outcome.

OTHER SOURCES OF SUPPORT



I like the way you are thinking and questioning what you are learning. You are applying your critical thinking skills. But to actually answer your last question ... one way of showing 'care' and 'diligence' is about being clear what you can or can't offer and then also working with the person to decide what other kinds of help they might need and where to look for it. Sometimes it's about helping someone decide what their next step is or what their options are. It's really about recognising your personal limits and making sure you can signpost people to other kinds of help if they need it. Even experienced practitioners have limits to what they can offer and need to recognise if a client needs specialist help or another kind of help.

ACTIVITY

Research what other support services are available in your area. Some areas you could explore include:

- Counselling services
- Health professionals
- Legal services
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Debt agencies
- Social Services
- Occupational Health
- Housing advice
- Self-help groups

SUMMARY

In order to work ethically and safely using counselling skills, you need to:

- Have a framework for looking at what right behaviour and attitudes are.
- Recognise the limits of your ability and monitor your own values.
- Convey the limits of what you can offer to the person you are helping.
- Enable the person you are helping to find other support where appropriate.