

## [Current Code of Ethics]

# IACP Code of Ethics and Practice for Counsellors / Psychotherapists

## Preamble

The first paragraph of the preamble defines counselling and psychotherapy as professional activities involving Association Members, hereafter called practitioners, and their clients. The practitioner offers an impartial helping relationship which respects the client's personal values and autonomy.

Practitioners recognise the importance of confidentiality in establishing such a relationship. Counselling and psychotherapy are formal activities involving an agreed contract. To maintain their effectiveness, practitioners review their work regularly in a confidential setting with a supervisor.

In joining the Association, Members agree to comply with the provisions of the Code of Ethics and Practice. The Code of Ethics and Practice applies to their professional activities and any behaviour that might impinge on those.

To ensure that they behave in an ethical manner, practitioners are required to use a formal procedure in examining ethical aspects of their work. In situations where ethical decisions can be complex and difficult, and different ethical principles may be in conflict, the best decision comes from considering issues systematically. Details of the recommended decision-making procedure are presented in Appendix A.

Like all other citizens, practitioners are subject to the Law, and their practice must conform to the Law.

## Content of the Code

The Code of Ethics and Practice is based on four overall ethical principles, under which specific ethical standards are elaborated in greater detail.

### • Principle 1:

**Respect for the rights and dignity of the client.** Practitioners are required to treat their clients as persons of intrinsic worth with a right to determine their own priorities, to respect clients' dignity and to give due regard to their moral and cultural values. Practitioners take care not to intrude inappropriately on clients' privacy. They treat as confidential all information obtained in the course of their work. As far as possible, they ensure that clients understand and consent to whatever professional action they propose.

### • Principle 2:

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**Competence.** Practitioners are required to monitor and develop their professional skills and ethical awareness on an ongoing basis. They recognize that their expertise and capacity for work are limited, and take care not to exceed the limits.

### • Principle 3:

**Responsibility.** In their professional activities, practitioners are required to act in a trustworthy and reputable manner towards clients and the community. They refer clients to colleagues and other professionals, as appropriate, to ensure the best service to clients. They act appropriately to resolve ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest.

### • Principle 4:

**Integrity.** Practitioners take steps to manage personal stress, maintain their own mental health, and ensure that their work is professionally supervised. They are required to be honest and accurate about their qualifications and the effectiveness of the services which they offer. They treat others in a fair, open and straightforward manner, honour professional commitments, and act to clarify any confusion about their role or responsibilities. They do not use the professional relationship to exploit clients and they deal appropriately with personal conflicts of interest. They take action against harmful or unethical behaviour in colleagues.

## The Code of Ethics and Practice in Detail

### 1. Respect for the Rights and Dignity of the client

Practitioners honour and promote the fundamental rights, dignity and worth of clients. They respect clients' rights to privacy, confidentiality, self-determination and autonomy, consistent with the practitioner's other professional obligations and with the law.

More specifically, practitioners shall:

#### 1.1. General Respect

1.1.1. Have sensible regard for clients' beliefs and values.

1.1.2. Not allow their service to clients to be diminished by factors such as gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, race, ethnicity, age, national origin, party politics, social standing or class.

1.1.3. Convey sensible respect for prevailing community mores, social customs and cultural expectations.

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1.1.4. Work in ways which promote clients' personal autonomy.

### **1.2. Privacy and Confidentiality.**

1.2.1. Ensure that the setting for sessions is appropriately private.

1.2.2 Treat in confidence personal information about clients, whether obtained directly or indirectly or by inference. Such information includes name, address, biographical details, and any descriptions of the client's life and circumstances which might make the client identifiable by others.

1.2.2. Ensure that information which may lead to the identification of clients is not transmitted through overlapping networks of confidential relationships.

1.2.3. Break confidentiality only where required by law, or where there are grounds for believing that clients will cause physical harm to themselves or others. Where feasible, practitioners shall endeavour to obtain the client's consent, and consult their supervisor or an experienced colleague, in advance of any such disclosure. However, in emergencies, practitioners shall make their own judgment as to what action is best.

1.2.4. Minimize any breach of confidentiality by conveying only that information which is necessary, and only to relevant persons.

1.2.5. In supervision and consultation with colleagues, reveal only that information about clients which is relevant for those purposes.

1.2.6. Discuss the limits of confidentiality with the client at the time of initial contracting, the discussion to include the implications for confidentiality of the supervisory relationship.

1.2.7. Store, handle, transfer and dispose of all records (including written, electronic, audio and video) securely and in a way that safeguards the client's right to privacy.

### **1.3. Informed Consent and Freedom of Consent.**

1.3.1. Ensure that the client consents to participate at all stages and respect clients' right to discontinue at any time.

1.3.2. Provide reasonable opportunity during the course of the relationship for review of the terms on which the service is being offered.

1.3.3. Not normally act on behalf of their clients. If they do, they shall ensure that the client consents in advance to any proposed action.

1.3.4. Where the client is concurrently engaged in another professional helping relationship, obtain the client's permission before conferring with the other professional.

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1.3.5. Obtain the client's consent before making audio or video recordings of sessions.

1.3.6. Obtain the client's consent to attendance at sessions by third parties.

1.3.7. When publishing research or case studies concerning clients or supervisees, ensure that identities are carefully disguised and obtain appropriate consent.

1.3.8. Written Permission from both parents / legal guardians should be obtained (where possible) by therapists before commencing therapy with a minor.

1.3.9 If it is not possible to obtain written permission from both parents / legal guardians then written permission must be obtained by at least one parent / legal guardian prior to the commencement of therapy.

## **2. Competence**

Practitioners strive to ensure and maintain high standards of competence in their work. They recognize the boundaries of their competence and the limitations of their expertise. They provide only those services and use only those techniques for which they are qualified by training and experience. It is an indication of competence that they recognize when they are unable to offer a professional service.

More specifically, practitioners shall:

### **2.1. Ethical Awareness**

2.1.1. Accept the obligation to study and understand the provisions of this Code of Ethics and Practice.

### **2.2. Limits of Competence.**

2.2.1. Offer or carry out only those professional activities for which they have established their competence to practice.

2.2.2. Recognise the boundaries of their competence, and take care not to exceed these.

2.2.3. Refrain offering a service when their functioning is impaired due to personal or emotional difficulties, illness, disability, alcohol, drugs or any other cause.

### **2.3. Continuing Professional Development.**

2.3.1. Monitor and develop their professional competence.

## **3. Responsibility**

Practitioners are aware of their professional responsibilities, and at all times take positive action to fulfil these responsibilities.

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More specifically, practitioners shall:

### 3.1. General Responsibility.

3.1.1. Review and evaluate the effectiveness of their professional activities.

3.1.2. Behave in professional activities in such a way as not to undermine public confidence in the profession.

3.1.3. Exercise appropriate respect towards colleagues.

### 3.2. Avoidance of Harm.

3.2.1. Set and monitor appropriate boundaries during the practitioner/client relationship, and make these explicit to the client.

3.2.2. Take all reasonable steps to ensure that the client suffers neither physical nor psychological harm during the practitioner/client relationship.

### 3.3. Continuity of Care.

3.3.1. Refer clients to other appropriately qualified practitioners or other professionals when it is appropriate to do so.

3.3.2. When referring a client, maintain support and responsibility for caring until contact has commenced with the person to whom referral was made.

3.3.3. Give reasonable notice, and make reasonably certain that discontinuation will cause no harm to the client, before discontinuing services.

3.3.4. Contribute where appropriate to the co-ordination of client services in order to avoid duplication or working at cross purposes. To facilitate this process, practitioners shall maintain adequate records and communicate with other service providers.

### 3.4. Resolving Dilemmas.

3.4.1. Use a systematic procedure for making ethical decisions and resolving ethical dilemmas (see Appendix A for the recommended procedure).

3.4.2. Take an active role in resolving conflicts of interest between themselves and third parties (for example, colleagues, employers, employing agencies) where there are implications for the client.

## **4. Integrity**

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Practitioners seek to promote integrity in the practice of their profession. They recognise their professional limitations and ensure that they receive appropriate support and supervision from colleagues.

In their professional activities they are honest, fair and respectful of others. They clarify for relevant parties the roles which they are performing, and attempt to function appropriately in accordance with these roles.

More specifically, practitioners shall:

### 4.1. Recognition of Professional Limitations.

4.1.1. Engage in self-care activities which help to avoid conditions (for example, burnout, and addictions) which could result in impaired judgment and interfere with their ability to benefit their clients.

4.1.2. Monitor their own personal functioning and seek help when their personal resources are sufficiently depleted to require such action.

4.1.3. Obtain professional supervision regularly in proportion to the amount of their work with clients.

4.1.4. Where appropriate, seek consultative support from colleagues.

### 4.2. Honesty and Accuracy.

4.2.1. Ensure that they and others accurately represent their education, training, experience, membership status within the Association, and the effectiveness of the services which they offer, in all spoken, written or printed communications.

4.2.2. Make a clear contract with the client which includes issues such as availability, fees, and cancelled appointments. They shall ensure that the contract is agreed before work commences. Any subsequent revisions of the contract shall be agreed with the client before they take effect.

4.2.3. When advertising, avoid misrepresentation or exaggeration about services offered.

### 4.3. Conflict of Interests and Exploitation.

4.3.1. Be acutely aware of the power dynamics of the practitioner/client relationship and shall not exploit clients in any way, either during the relationship or after its conclusion.

4.3.2. Be acutely aware of the problematic nature of dual relationships (for example, with students, business associates, employees or clients), and recognize that it is not always possible to avoid them (e.g. when offering services in a small community, or engaging in training).

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Where it is possible, practitioners shall avoid such relationships; where it is not, they shall take appropriate steps to safeguard the interests of those involved.

4.3.3. Where possible, avoid conflicts of interest that may affect their relationship with the client, and where it is not possible, shall make these conflicts of interest explicit to the client.

4.3.4. Offer the same standard of service whether the work is paid or voluntary.

4.3.5. Seek supervision and / or consultative support on all issues relating to conflict of interests.

4.3.6. Ensure that their supervisor does not occupy other significant roles in their lives.

4.4. Actions of Colleagues.

4.4.1. Remonstrate privately with a colleague if that colleague appears to be engaging in unethical behaviour; where this action does not resolve the issue, they shall bring the matter confidentially and without malice to the attention of the Association's Complaints Committee.

The first edition of this code was adopted prior to 1991.

The second edition became operative on 25th April, 1998.

This Code of Ethics was ratified at the AGM 2005.

## **Appendix A**

### **Recommended Procedure for Ethical Decision-Making.**

Section 2.1 of the Code of Ethics and Practice deals with ethical awareness, and Clause 3.4.1 states that practitioners shall use a systematic procedure for making ethical decisions. The following procedure is recommended for dealing with both immediate dilemmas and routine work-related issues.

1. Define carefully the issues and parties involved (the latter may include the practitioner, the client, members of the client's family, the practitioner's own employer and co-workers organisations purchasing or providing services, and the general public).
2. Consult the Code of Ethics and Practice, and identify relevant principles and clauses. Also consult other applicable professional guidelines (e.g. from government departments, health boards) and any pertinent legislation.
3. Evaluate the rights, responsibilities and welfare of all affected parties.

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4. Generate as many alternative decisions as possible - the more the better.
5. Evaluate carefully the likely outcome of each decision.
6. Choose what, in your professional judgment, is the best decision, implement it, and inform relevant parties.
7. Finally, take responsibility for the consequences of the decision.

The complexity of ethical issues makes it likely that different principles and clauses will occasionally clash; in addition, the provisions of the Code of Ethics and Practice may also clash with the Law and / or other relevant guidelines. Unfortunately, the resolution of ethical dilemmas is not guaranteed to be simple.

However, the law accepts that professionals may make errors of judgment, and that these are not the same as malpractice.

The formal decision-making procedure is intended to reduce the incidence of decisions which are mistakes because they are taken in the heat of the moment, without consideration of all the relevant factors. What is required, in all cases, is a considered professional judgment taken in a systematic way.

It is desirable to keep a written record of deliberations at each stage of the process.