

# Equality, diversity and inclusion within the counselling professions

**Good Practice in Action 062  
Commonly Asked Questions**

**Updated June 2024**

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Good Practice in Action 062 Commonly Asked Questions: *Equality, diversity and inclusion within the counselling professions* is published by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, BACP House, 15 St John's Business Park, Lutterworth, Leicestershire, LE17 4HB.

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Design by Steers McGillan Eves.

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## Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with the current BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

## Using Commonly Asked Questions resources

The membership agreement with BACP establishes a contractual commitment by members to abide by the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*, which includes a responsibility for members to keep the skills and knowledge relevant to their work up to date.

The BACP Good Practice in Action resources are solely intended to support good practice by offering general information on specific topics based on legal principles and policy applicable at the time of writing. They are intended for information purposes only and are not a substitute for professional advice. BACP and the author accept no responsibility for and accept no liability as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting on the basis of the resources.

Practice issues and dilemmas are often complex, and may vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the therapeutic interventions provided. We therefore strongly recommend consulting your supervisor, and also, wherever necessary, a suitably qualified practitioner or lawyer. Some professional insurers will provide legal advice as part of their service.

BACP and the author make no representation or warranty as to the completeness or accuracy of the information contained in the resources. References in this resource were up to date at the time of writing but there may be changes in particular to the law, government departments, government policies and guidance, websites and web addresses. Organisations and agencies may also change their practice or policies, so please be alert for any changes that may affect your therapy practice.

In this resource, the word 'therapist' is used to mean specifically counsellors and psychotherapists and 'therapy' to mean specifically counselling and psychotherapy.

The terms 'practitioner' and 'counselling related services' are used generically in a wider sense, to include the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care.

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## 1 Who is this resource for and what does it aim to do?

This is one of a series of resources for practitioners, supervisors, trainers, or researchers who want to know more about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

This resource highlights questions BACP members have raised as being common during their therapeutic work in respect of equality, diversity and inclusion.

The aim of this resource is to provide a basic introduction to some of the issues connected to EDI. People using this resource are encouraged to see it as a springboard for their own further study. Further resources on EDI can be found at: [resources \(bacp.co.uk\)](http://resources.bacp.co.uk), with links to more detailed information included at the end of this resource. It is always recommended that practitioners who have questions relating to EDI should consult a supervisor or other appropriate professional.

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## 2 What is EDI and why is it important in therapy?

Equality, diversity and inclusion cover all aspects of relationships where differences can lead to barriers to access, or to other disadvantages.

An awareness of diversity issues in counselling is important to ensure we are abiding by the principles of *Justice and Non-maleficence* which are core aspects of BACP's *Ethical Framework*. We also have some legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 ([legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk)). As practitioners, we need to have knowledge of these legal requirements to ensure that we are working within the law.

Moreover, challenges to EDI affect our clients' lives and experiences in very real ways, and need to be recognised and, as much as possible, accounted for in the support we provide for them. The set of BACP resources relating to equality, diversity and inclusion will help readers understand some of the difficulties faced by people accessing therapy, and suggest some ways to create a safe therapeutic environment for everyone, so that no one is prevented from receiving support because of their differences.

### 3 What does the Equality Act say about how we should approach EDI as practitioners?

The Equality Act 2010 identifies nine protected characteristics. The EDI resources explore each of these characteristics, and how they might manifest themselves in therapeutic settings:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion and belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation.

Some of these protected characteristics, such as age, or sexual orientation are relevant to all of us. In respect of these characteristics, whilst some identities are more often prone to marginalisation by society, the Equality Act 2010 does not apply to any particular identity or orientation within a protected characteristic over any other.

People with any of the protected characteristics are protected not only as employees, but also as service users. Discrimination can be direct or indirect. Both have the result of treating someone less favourably than you would treat others, due to a protected characteristic. We must not either directly or indirectly discriminate against someone on the grounds of any of the protected characteristics in respect of who we work with, or who we employ. If the person has a disability, we may be required to make reasonable adjustments such that they can access services or work. See [BACP Good Practice in Action 080](#) and [BACP Good Practice in Action 129](#) for more information on making reasonable adjustments to your practice.

The Equality Act also prohibits:

- Harassment (i.e. engaging in unwanted conduct towards another person) because of that person's age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation; and
- Victimisation (person A towards person B) by subjecting them to a detriment because B does a protected act, or A believes that B has done, or may do, a protected act. See [BACP Good Practice in Action 108 Legal Resource](#) for more detail.

It is important to remember that the law sets out the minimum standard of access and equality. We are committed by BACP's *Ethical Framework* to respect our clients and to: '*take the law concerning equality, diversity and inclusion into careful consideration and strive for a higher standard than the legal minimum*'. (Good Practice, point 23) (BACP 2018).

It is also important to remember that it is not only the differences that are protected by law which can create disadvantage. Of the many other factors that can cause barriers to access, some examples include:

- education, employment or socio-economic status
- gender identity (as defined by the individual, and not covered by the protected characteristic of 'gender re-assignment')
- immigration status
- experiences like abuse or addiction
- mental or physical health issues not covered by the law
- language and communication barriers not covered by the protected characteristic of 'disability'.

It is also important to recognise that these factors and differences may be interacting to impact individual experience (intersectionality), potentially leading to further barriers or discrimination.

If you work in an organisation, you will need to familiarise yourself with your organisation's equality and diversity policies in addition to the legislation and this resource.

## 4 How can I start to become more inclusive as a practitioner?

As therapists, we need to be alert to anything that can affect the power balance with our clients, including any kind of difference that could place us in a position of privilege, or disadvantage our clients. The idea is not to do away with power imbalances in therapy, as this may not be fully possible, but to ensure we are aware of them and minimise their negative impact on the therapeutic relationship.

BACP has produced several resources, which explore different aspects of EDI in more detail. A list can be found at the end of this resource.

More detail is included in each of the EDI resources, but a good starting place is the 'four As' of inclusive practice:

- **Awareness:** Be aware that we all have differences, but some of those differences can lead to barriers and oppression. Make sure that you are educated about the historical, social and cultural aspects of different characteristics, including the discrimination and oppression that your clients are likely to have experienced. Do not wait for them to educate you about these characteristics or differences. Inform yourself through CPD and individual learning, at the same time as being aware that each client's experience and perspective are unique.
- **Assumptions:** It is only by recognising that we all carry assumptions and prejudices that we can start to challenge them and be genuinely inclusive. Whether or not we have protected characteristics ourselves, we are likely to have spent most of our lives in environments which foster prejudice towards anyone perceived as 'different'. The EDI resources are a good starting point to help recognise in ourselves any damaging beliefs or assumptions that we may need to challenge.
- **Allyship:** For those who do not identify as having a particular characteristic, being an ally for an individual or a community that does, is a vital part of fostering inclusivity. Taking on the role of an ally does not always mean actively campaigning on behalf of a group of people.

It can also mean creating and communicating a safe and accepting space where they know they can be themselves and be heard and understood. While this is an important part of forming any therapeutic relationship, be mindful that this has a particular value and meaning for clients who belong to groups that have historically faced discrimination or exclusion at societal level.

- **Ask:** Each person is a unique individual whose needs might be different from someone else who identifies as belonging to the same group. Even if you share the same characteristics, your experience of them might be quite different. While some knowledge of their community is helpful, it is important to be attentive to their individual experience and needs. Do not automatically assume that obvious differences are the reason that a client is seeking therapy.

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## The practitioner's rights

While we mostly think of BACP's *Ethical Framework* in relation to our duty to our clients, it's important to acknowledge that as an individual practitioner, you may be on the receiving end of issues related to equality and discrimination. This may be with regards to a protected characteristic, or any of the other factors listed above that create barriers for people. The challenge may come from a client's behaviour towards you, or if you work in a team, from your colleague(s) or manager(s). Your psychological safety and freedom from discrimination are vital prerequisites for you to practise ethically, safely and be of service to others. Seek supervision and guidance at the earliest opportunity if such a situation arises.

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## About the author

Nikki Dhillon Keane is fluent in British Sign Language and has worked as a therapist with the Deaf community for 20 years. She also works in private practice with hearing clients. She specialises in working with diverse spiritualities and cultures, and has set up several projects working with different religious and cultural groups and with the Deaf community. She gives training to therapists and religious groups on disability and Deaf awareness, working with diversity, and working with survivors of abuse from different backgrounds. She is the author of *Domestic abuse in Church Communities* ([www.rpbooks.co.uk](http://www.rpbooks.co.uk)) and co-founder of the Faith and VAWG Coalition, raising awareness of work at the intersection of faith and violence against women and girls.

## Further resources

BACP (2018) *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. Lutterworth: BACP, [www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/ethical-framework-for-the-counselling-professions](http://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/ethical-framework-for-the-counselling-professions) (accessed 28 June 2024).

BACP (2019) Good Practice Across the Counselling Professions 001: *Gender, sexual and relationship diversity (GSRD)* (Content Ed. Barker, M.). Lutterworth: BACP, [www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/good-practice-across-the-counselling-professions/gpacp001-gender-sexual-and-relationship-diversity](http://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/good-practice-across-the-counselling-professions/gpacp001-gender-sexual-and-relationship-diversity) (accessed 28 June 2024).

BACP (2020) Good Practice in Action 063 Clinical Reflections for Practice: *Equality, diversity and inclusion within the counselling professions* (Content Ed. Rattray, S.). Lutterworth: BACP, (accessed 28 June 2024).

BACP (2023) Good Practice in Action 080 Fact Sheet: *Reasonable adjustments in the counselling professions* (Content Ed. Rattray, S.). Lutterworth: BACP, (accessed 28 June 2024).

BACP (2023) Good Practice in Action 091 Fact Sheet: *Working with interpreters in the counselling professions* (Content Ed. Chaturvedi, S.). Lutterworth: BACP, (accessed 28 June 2024).

BACP (2023) Good Practice in Action 096 Clinical Reflections for Practice: *Working with disability in the counselling professions* (Content Ed. Rattray, S.) (accessed 28 June 2024).

BACP (2023) Good Practice in Action 108 Legal Resource: *Equality, diversity and inclusion within the counselling professions* (Content Ed. Whalen, C.). Lutterworth: BACP, (accessed 28 June 2024).

BACP (2023) Good Practice in Action 129 Clinical Reflections for Practice: *Reasonable adjustments in the counselling professions in private practice* (Content Ed. Rattray, S.), (accessed 28 June 2024).

All Good Practice in Action resources are available at: [www.bacp.co.uk/gpia](http://www.bacp.co.uk/gpia).

Equality Act 2010 [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents) (accessed 28 June 2024).

Equality and Human Rights Commission 2023 *Protected Characteristics* [www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/individuals](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/individuals) (accessed 28 June 2024).