

Workplace counselling competence framework



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Workplace counselling competence framework

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1 Knowledge of and ability to work within the ethical and legal requirements of a workplace counselling service	5 Assessment and signposting	7 Working with common workplace-related issues	9 Meta-competences for providing workplace counselling
2 Understanding and working in the organisational context	6 Risk assessment and response	8 Offering trauma support	
3 Knowledge of the relationships between employment and health and wellbeing			
4 Knowledge of and ability to establish and institute brief interventions			

Core competences for workplace counselling

1 Knowledge of and ability to work within the ethical and legal requirements of a workplace counselling service

1.1 An ability to draw on a working knowledge of employment legislation and policies and procedures

i. Examples include:

- equal opportunities
- the recruitment process
- redundancy and retirement
- disciplinary action, grievance and tribunals
- bullying and harassment
- employment contracts
- illness and disability
- terms and conditions of employment
- health and safety
- salaries.

- ii. An ability to draw on knowledge of employment legislation regarding reasonable adjustments and working patterns, and the ways in which these apply to clients, for example:
- job-sharing arrangements
 - special leave arrangements, e.g. for carer responsibilities and parents
 - home-working
 - adapting work schedules to meet employees' needs (e.g. phased return after illness, and working in alternative locations to enable access)
 - flexible-working requests (e.g. reduction in hours and change in shift patterns)
 - Understanding of the role of the fit note from GPs in pronouncing unfitness and fitness for work and any recommendations.

1.2 Ability to draw on knowledge of relevant ethical frameworks, codes and standards relevant to the workplace

- i. An ability to draw on knowledge of ethical practice relevant to workplace counselling in order to:
- identify incompatibilities and conflicts between the aims of the organisation and counselling ethics
 - identify conflicts arising from balancing a duty of care to the client against accountability to the organisation.
- ii. An ability to draw on knowledge of ethical frameworks in order to manage potential dilemmas in workplace counselling.
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1.3 Ability to manage confidentiality when working in the organisational context

- i.** An ability to draw on knowledge of legislation and policy relating to confidentiality and data protection in the organisational setting, e.g.:
 - GDPR and information-sharing
 - record-keeping, storage, retention and disposal of session notes and any process notes
 - recording, storage, retention and disposal of personal information, including any anonymised or pseudonymised statistical data for reporting purposes and service evaluation
 - data portability and access-to-record requests.
 - ii.** An ability to ensure that both the client and the organisation are clear about how confidentiality will be managed, and specifically the conditions under which it will and will not be maintained, e.g.:
 - harm to self and others
 - legal exceptions
 - agreement with others, e.g. Occupational Health and General Practitioners.
 - iii.** An ability to ensure that client consent to confidentiality, boundaries and entering the therapeutic process is explicitly informed and freely given.
 - iv.** An ability to maintain confidentiality in the face of additional pressures within a workplace setting to disclose information (e.g. from employers, managers or colleagues asking for or offering information).
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1.4 Ability to use clinical supervision to discuss issues that commonly arise in workplace counselling

Examples include:

- issues specific to the workplace and employment
- issue overload, e.g. the majority of a caseload focusing on the same issue
- dual relationships and conflicts of interest
- conflicting responsibilities regarding accountability to both the client and the employer/organisation
- transitions between time-limited and long-term practice
- employment-related legal and ethical issues.

1.5 Ability to establish and maintain professional boundaries

An ability to establish, maintain and manage professional boundaries, and any challenges to these arising from the organisational setting, e.g.:

- ability to explain to the client the ways that boundaries operate
 - conflicts arising from a duty of care to the client and accountability to the organisation
 - contact with clients in the workplace outside of counselling sessions
 - sharing the same employer as the client(s)
 - working within a multidisciplinary team
 - organisational attempts to use the counselling service to influence aspects of the client's behaviour
 - dual relationships and conflicts of interests.
- 

2 Understanding and working as a counsellor in the organisational context

2.1 Knowledge of the organisational context

- i. An ability to draw on knowledge of the role and remit of the organisation's counselling service and its relationship with other support services, in order to communicate this to relevant parties.
- ii. An ability to draw on knowledge of the organisation's provision for specific areas of difficulty (e.g. disability support services, support for employees from abroad, financial advice etc.).
- iii. An ability to draw on knowledge of the ways in which counselling services may contribute to organisational objectives, e.g.:
 - by reducing sickness absence, absenteeism, presenteeism and staff turnover
 - by maximising the productivity and motivation of employees (e.g. helping them to manage psychological difficulties or improve their self-confidence).

2.2 Working in the organisational context

- i. An ability to meet the needs of the individual client while also operating within the constraints of the organisational context, e.g.:
 - maintaining, during the session, a focus on areas that can be addressed within the time constraint of the counselling provision agreed with the employer/organisation
 - identifying which issues can be 'deferred', so as to maintain a focus on the client's ability to resolve more immediate issues
 - recognising, acknowledging and responding to clients' underlying emotional difficulties, while working to restore and maintain both their fitness to work and their ability to achieve a healthy, restorative work–life balance within the organisational context.
- ii. An ability to balance competing organisational and ethical pressures when providing counselling, e.g.:
 - an organisation's desire for good attendance against a client's need to take sickness leave or temporarily withdraw from the workplace
 - an employer's judgment that employees are not fit to work, against their legal and ethical requirement to support employees to stay in the workplace
 - an organisation or manager's wish for a certain client to be prioritised on a waiting list or to receive extra sessions, against the ethical aim of fair provision for all clients.

2.3 Ability to identify and communicate the remit of the counselling service within the organisation

Dependent on role, setting, ability and circumstances.

- i.** An ability to:
 - provide clear and current information about what the counselling service offers
 - outline the benefits of workplace counselling
 - promote the counselling service and widen participation
 - provide managers with clear protocols for referring employees to the service or arrangements for self-referral
 - provide constructive feedback to referrers when inappropriate referrals are made (e.g. where a problem is primarily of a disciplinary nature or requires longer-term work)
 - work with other support services (both internal and external to the organisation) to meet the needs of employees with co-existing concerns that lie outside the remit of counselling (e.g. disabilities, welfare and/or serious mental health problems), within the agreed confidentiality agreement
 - liaise with the organisation to promote and review the counselling service (e.g. reports on the outcomes and impact of the counselling service, and reporting trends in employee referrals, presentations and outcomes).
- ii.** An ability to draw on knowledge that counsellors working within and/or for organisations may have roles and responsibilities additional to that of providing face-to-face counselling, e.g. contributing to:
 - the development of service-specific policies and protocols (e.g. safeguarding and managing confidentiality)
 - the development of organisational policies and protocols (e.g. dealing with critical incidents)
 - the collection, recording and reporting of statistical data that evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the counselling service
 - the development and promotion of the counselling service
 - initiatives to promote health and wellbeing in the workplace.

3 Knowledge of the relationships between employment and health/wellbeing

3.1 An ability to draw on knowledge of factors in the working environment that can impact on health and wellbeing

i. Examples include:

- the nature and quality of work and of the working environment
- interpersonal relationships within the working environment
- working hours and shift patterns
- pay and working conditions
- organisational change
- job security
- volume and complexity of workload
- inadequate or low managerial/organisational support
- lack of autonomy
- lack of training.

ii. An ability to draw on knowledge that work/employment:

- meets important psychosocial needs and can be central to individual identity, societal roles and social status
- contributes to socio-economic status and so is a significant driver of social gradients in physical/mental health and morbidity.
- can be detrimental to both physical and mental health if it acts as a stressor.

- iii. An ability to draw on knowledge of the strong association between unemployment and poorer health, including:
 - higher levels of morbidity, poorer general health and greater incidence of long-term illness
 - higher rates of medical consultation and uptake of medical resources
 - greater psychological distress and psychological/psychiatric morbidity.
- iv. An ability to draw on knowledge that regaining employment can lead to improved self-esteem, improved health and reduced psychological distress and morbidity.
- v. An ability to draw on knowledge of the benefits of employment for people with long-term health conditions or disabilities, e.g.:
 - to promote recovery and rehabilitation
 - to improve self-esteem and self-confidence
 - to improve quality of life and wellbeing.

3.2 Impact of mental health on workplace functioning

- i. An ability to draw on knowledge of the ways in which the workplace can impact on employees' mental health, e.g. as a contributor to poor mental health, as the cause of poor mental health and/or as a support for good mental health.
- ii. An ability to draw on knowledge of the ways in which an employee's mental health can impact on their employment, e.g. absence and difficulty.
- iii. An ability to draw on knowledge of the benefits of organisational support for employees' wellbeing, for example:
 - the value of communication and cooperation between employers, employees and support agencies in supporting health and wellbeing in the workplace
 - the importance of managers' role in identifying and responding to employees' mental health problems at work.

4 Knowledge of and ability to establish and institute brief interventions

4.1 Adapting interventions to the workplace

An ability to acknowledge that counselling in the workplace is often time-limited and time sensitive and intended to support the client's ability to function. e.g. by:

- setting goals appropriate to the number of counselling sessions available
- focusing on achieving the best outcome for the client within the available time
- referring and signposting clients who need a longer time-frame (e.g. who present with long-standing, complex issues that are unlikely to be resolved by short-term counselling)
- instituting effective interventions within a limited time-frame (e.g. by balancing the exploratory, supportive and problem-solving aspects of counselling, against the need to maintain a focus on achieving therapeutic goals)
- offering interventions flexibly (while still regular in occurrence) in line with any constraints imposed by a client's working schedule (e.g. in relation to shift patterns, workload or holidays).

4.2 Ability to initiate time-limited interventions

- i. An ability to:
 - ensure that the client is aware of the number of sessions available, and when and how the counselling will end
 - form, maintain and end a therapeutic relationship with the client within time-limited work
 - discuss the client's expectations of the counselling to agree what can be achieved in the time available
 - help clients understand and manage emotions that can feel overwhelming and support their ability to cope and function in the workplace
- ii. Ability to monitor the progress of counselling in relation to its time-limited goals, by:
 - maintaining the therapeutic focus on agreed goals
 - regularly reviewing progress towards the achievement of goals and any shifts/changes in these that emerge
 - regularly eliciting feedback from the client on their sense of progress
 - regularly indicating the number of remaining sessions
 - liaising with the organisation/referrer, where appropriate, to ensure that the number of sessions provided, including any extensions to this, is agreed with enough time to manage endings
 - managing issues of dependency in short-term work.
- iii. Ability to address therapeutic challenges that impact on time-limited work and to respond in a timely manner, for example:
 - being alert to indications that the client is feeling 'stuck' (e.g. talking repetitively, feeling emotionally 'flat' and/or showing signs of disengagement) and exploring the reasons for this
 - helping the client to identify and focus on the changes they want to make in the context of the therapeutic time available.

4.3 Ability to conclude time-limited interventions

An ability to:

- initiate the ending phase, in line with the contracted number of counselling sessions, where appropriate
 - help the client review progress and to assess the extent to which their goals have been achieved
 - identify where the client's problems have not been fully resolved and to discuss strategies for achieving and maintaining wellbeing post-therapy
 - explore, with the client, options for further or future therapeutic interventions
 - signpost or refer client to other services/agencies, as appropriate.
- 

Assessment and signposting

5 Assessment and signposting

5.1 Assessment

- i. An ability to work with the client to assess the degree to which work-related issues impact on their wellbeing, for example:
 - the demands of their job role
 - the clarity of their role
 - their level of autonomy and control in their role
 - what opportunities are present, e.g. promotion, flexible hours and training
 - what threats are present, e.g. bullying, redundancy and environmental issues
 - what short- or long-term support is available to them
 - relationships in the workplace (with both managers and colleagues).
- ii. An ability to assess whether the client's needs can be met within the remit of the employment/workplace support or whether external support would be more appropriate, for example:
 - specialist counselling for deep-rooted and/or complex mental health conditions
 - immediate support in a crisis situation
 - occupational health
 - external services (e.g. medical intervention, psychiatric intervention and/or practical intervention)
 - other support that employers may offer, e.g. health benefits, mentoring, coaching, mediation, critical-incident responses, education and training.

5.2 Signposting/onward referral

An ability to:

- assess when onward referral or signposting to other services is the most appropriate way forward, and to carry this out in a timely manner
- draw on knowledge about the referral/signposting process, in order to meet the client's needs, for example:
 - who will make the referral
 - the nature of the contact between the referral agency, the organisation and the workplace counselling service/counsellor
 - how confidentiality will be managed through the referral process
- maintain appropriate engagement and containment with clients and the workplace during the referral process.



6 Risk assessment and response

6.1 Knowledge of policies and legislation for managing risk and maintaining safety

An ability to draw on knowledge of:

- working within any specific service procedures where applicable
- national, local and organisational strategies standards, policies and procedures regarding clinical risk assessment and risk management
- national, local and organisational strategies standards, policies and procedures regarding confidentiality and information-sharing
- the principles of the relevant mental health acts (e.g. Mental Health and Treatment Act, Mental Health Act, Mental Capacity Act).

6.2 Knowledge of risk

An ability to draw on knowledge:

- that the different stages and forms of risk assessment can be carried out by different clinicians and agencies, combining information from multiple sources (such as interviews and, where appropriate, relevant informants)
- of the different forms of risk routinely assessed
- of additional risk-assessment requirements relevant to a workplace setting (e.g. health and safety, aggression at work and public safety)
- that risk-assessment tools (such as questionnaires) should not be used to predict suicide or self-harm as they are unreliable.

6.3 Assessment of risk

In the context of conducting a comprehensive assessment, an ability to carry out an in-depth structured and collaborative risk assessment that combines information from multiple sources such as clinical assessments, observations, other appropriate informants and/or agencies, comprising:

- the development of a good working alliance with the client
- a collaborative and systematic assessment of the demographic, psychological, social and historical factors known to be risk factors for self-harm, self-neglect, harm to others and harm from others
- an ability to identify the client's view of their experience, including their view of possible trigger factors to harmful events, and ideas about interventions or changes in their working environment that might be helpful in mitigating risk of future harm
- an ability to integrate risk assessment with knowledge of the client and their social context, including their strengths and any resilience factors.

6.4 Ability to develop a risk-management plan

- i. An ability to create a risk-management plan, in collaboration with the client, that:
 - identifies the actions to be taken by the client and relevant services should there be an acute increase in risk factors and/or should others perceive there to be a crisis
 - responds to the risk in a timely manner.
- ii. Ability to draw on knowledge that sharing client information in the event of serious risk can prevent harm to the client, the workplace and society as a whole.
- iii. Ability to address serious risk by:
 - taking the client's wishes into consideration wherever possible, but prioritising client and public safety
 - ensuring the client is kept informed and supported throughout the process
 - assessing the client's capacity to make sound judgments
 - assessing the immediacy of suicide or serious self-harm
 - communicating clearly with relevant authorities and the employer if necessary, to maintain client and public safety. Client information should be shared objectively, respectfully and only with someone who is in a position to make a difference.

Areas of work

7 Working with common workplace-related issues

- i. An ability to draw on knowledge of common workplace-related issues and their impact on the organisation and employees.
- ii. An ability to work with common workplace-related issues, for example:
 - difficult relationships with employers or colleagues
 - workload and/or role
 - salary/financial issues
 - carer responsibilities and managing work–life balance
 - redundancy and workplace restructuring or closure
 - stress.

7.1 Ability to understand and work with stress in the workplace

- i. Ability to draw upon knowledge of the causes, symptoms and consequences of workplace stress in order to work with clients to find strategies for understanding, managing and reducing this.
- ii. Ability to draw upon knowledge of the six main areas of work that can affect stress levels and are associated with poor health, lower productivity and increased accident and sickness-absence rates:
 - demands – this includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment
 - control – how much say the person has in the way they do their work
 - support – this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line managers and colleagues

- relationships – this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- role – whether people understand their role within the organisation and feel adequate work satisfaction in their role and within the organisation, and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles
- change – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

7.2 Working with bullying

- i. An ability to draw on knowledge that bullying can take many different forms, for example:
 - through social media or other virtual environments
 - individual bullying
 - scapegoating and group bullying
 - overt and covert forms of bullying
 - organisational bullying and bullying cultures
 - harassment.
- ii. An ability to draw on knowledge of bullying and harassment policies and procedures in the workplace.
- iii. An ability to work with clients' experience of bullying in the workplace by:
 - helping them express the impact of the bullying
 - conveying a sense of understanding their reactions to the bullying behaviour
 - working to empower the client to make a decision about what they want to do about the bullying
 - supporting the client to take their chosen course of action
 - discussing with the client the possible outcomes of making a grievance.

7.3 Working with relational difficulties

- i. An ability to understand and work with clients experiencing relational difficulties in the workplace, for example:
 - different management styles and client responses
 - issues of interpersonal conflict
 - the client's subjective experience of authority and historical patterns of relating
 - the emotional impact of the relational difficulty
 - the capacity for change in manager and colleague relationships.

 - ii. An ability to draw on knowledge of the ways in which the concepts of control and autonomy in the workplace impact on employees' wellbeing, such as:
 - feelings of being over-controlled (micro-managed)
 - feelings that result from having too little support in the workplace.

 - iii. An ability to draw on knowledge that a perceived lack of work control can lead to a significant level of work stress, and that a supportive structure that is considerate to employee health and wellbeing can reduce stress levels and help low mood.
- 

7.4 Impact of organisational change in the workplace

- i. An ability to draw on knowledge of common organisational changes in the workplace that can result in workplace-related stress, e.g.:
 - job-role change
 - change of location or setting
 - redundancy
 - promotion.
- ii. An ability to understand and work with clients' feelings arising from the impact of organisational change, such as:
 - feelings of anxiety associated with potential or actual job losses
 - emotions associated with the risk of redundancy (such as fear, loss, anger, disillusionment, resistance, distrust, demotivation, disinterest, insecurity, low productivity and hostility)
 - managing feelings (e.g. of unfairness) if some employees keep their jobs or gain promotion while others are made redundant
 - a lack of congruence between organisational and employee values and beliefs
 - feelings of lack of inclusion or consultation in the change process.
- iii. An ability to identify and work with clients' strengths during the process of organisational change, e.g. resilience, adaptability and flexibility.
- iv. An ability to identify and work with clients' weaknesses during the process of organisational change, e.g. challenge to personal morals and/or values, and resistance to change.
- v. An ability to be aware of risk factors during the organisational change process, such as an increase in self-harming behaviour, suicidal intent etc.

7.5 Workload

An ability to draw on knowledge of workload issues in order to be able to work with the client to:

- identify issues such as stress, anxiety, burnout and low morale that relate to dissatisfaction with workload
- identify ways of addressing workload issues and managing time differently
- decide how – and with whom – to communicate concerns over workload issues
- identify time spent on low-value and frustrating aspects of the work and explore solutions
- address work responsibilities relating to business needs, while also addressing issues of work–life balance.

7.6 Working with grievances and formal proceedings

An ability to:

- draw on knowledge of the organisation's grievance policies and procedures in order to support the client during the process
 - recognise and manage boundary conflicts and challenges when supporting a client during a grievance process
 - work with the client's expectations, fears and hopes when in a grievance situation, while being aware of the external reality within the organisation.
- 

8 Offering trauma support

- i. An ability to draw on knowledge that:
 - a broad range of events present in the workplace – e.g. road traffic collision, assault, bullying, harassment, abuse and bereavement – can be experienced as traumatic
 - trauma reactions can be complex and cumulative, particularly where previously unresolved trauma is triggered by current events
 - repeated exposure to trauma, in the course of professional duties (e.g. first responders) can be associated with trauma responses
 - counsellors working with repeated exposure to accounts of trauma are at risk of suffering from vicarious trauma.
- ii. An ability, where appropriate training has been provided, to support an organisational response to traumatic incidents, for example:
 - establishing and maintaining appropriate lines of communication with managers and/or employers in order to plan responses to critical incidents (e.g. road traffic accidents, violent attacks and deaths in service)
 - offering psychoeducational interventions to groups of staff experiencing reactions to trauma
 - providing training to members of staff, for example to enable them to offer peer support to colleagues, or helping them to break bad news following a critical incident
 - offering debriefing for managers and others directly dealing with the incident
 - providing information and signposting for staff affected by the incident
 - where the role and remit of an organisation regularly exposes its employees to potentially traumatic experiences (e.g. blue-light services), helping to develop and implement protocols that support staff.

- iii. An ability to work with individual clients who are experiencing trauma reactions, for example:
 - identifying common signs and symptoms of trauma reactions and post-traumatic stress disorder, and planning appropriate interventions to manage risk in those experiencing trauma reactions
 - identifying trauma reactions that may benefit from a brief intervention and those that warrant specialist referral
 - providing information on common reactions to trauma to help normalise the client's experience.
- iv. An ability to identify (and so manage) vicarious traumatisation in oneself as a practitioner (e.g. through self-awareness and reflection, seeking supervision and support).
- v. An ability to identify and work with individuals who are experiencing vicarious traumatisation due to their own care-giving or professional role, where they have an exposure to the traumatic material of traumatised service users (e.g. emergency services workers, social workers, journalists, police working with historical sex-abuse cases etc.).

8.1 Working with an emergency/crisis response

An ability to draw on knowledge that workplace counselling may involve intervening at short notice when an employee is in crisis to:

- work flexibly with clients in a variety of situations with limited resources
 - gain information from the client about the crisis and what may have led to it
 - identify a client-agreed course of action, including the next steps to be taken
 - draw on knowledge of the appropriate services available for referral or co-working (e.g. medical centres, accident and emergency, community mental health, crisis teams and primary care services).
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Meta-competences

9 Meta-competences for providing workplace counselling

9.1 Assessment and risk

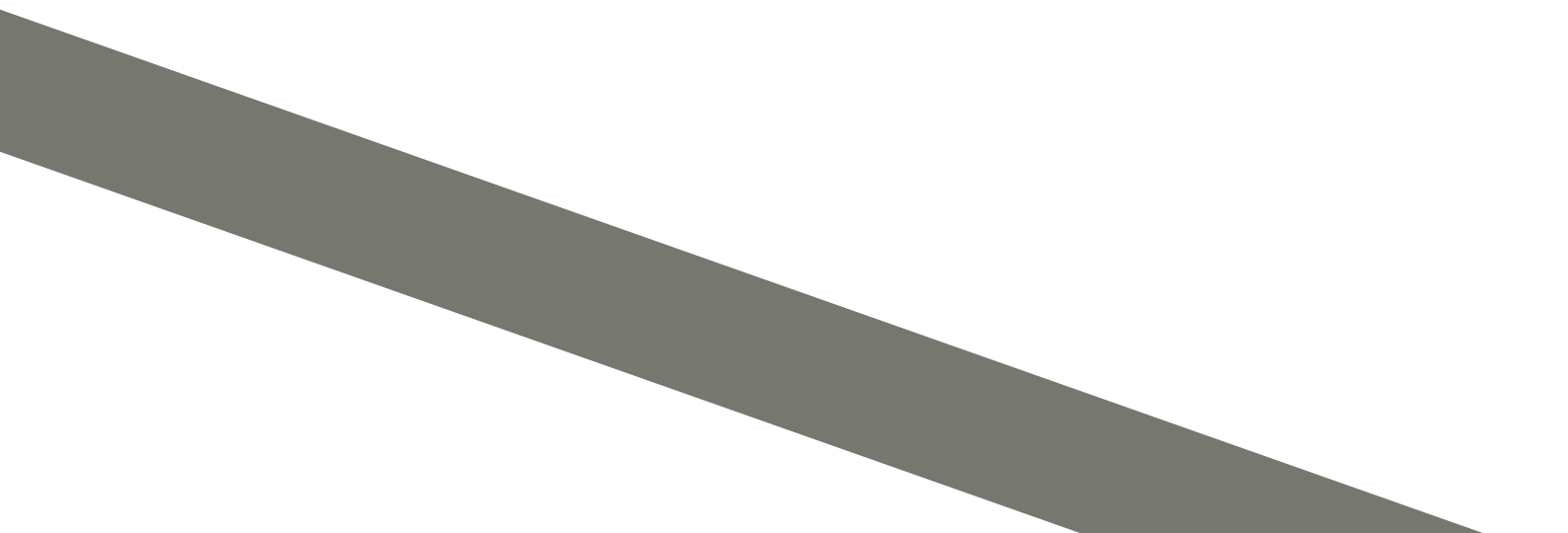
An ability to balance respect for an employee's autonomy, against the need to avoid harm when making safeguarding decisions (for example, a paramedic who is keen to continue working but who is drinking alcohol during work hours).

9.2 Working within resource limitations

An ability to plan and provide interventions that reflect the needs of clients but also reflect the resources available (for example, by offering time-limited work).

9.3 Working within personal and professional limitations

An ability to reflect on and assess personal and professional limits of capability in order to provide safe and effective workplace counselling in identified settings – e.g. to acknowledge, if applicable, a lack of expertise in trauma and critical-incident work, and therefore not to work with clients with this presentation.



9.4 Managing boundaries

- i. An ability to balance active engagement within the organisation, against the need to maintain appropriate boundaries and ethical practice.
- ii. An ability to be aware of and manage potential boundary conflicts. Some workplace counsellors' roles involve other elements, e.g. group facilitation and/or health-and-wellbeing workshops; these could involve working with the same person or people) across different contexts.
- iii. An ability to judge when to maintain confidentiality and when (and how) to communicate information with other parties.

9.5 Responding to crises

When responding to a crisis in relation to the organisation, an ability:

- to judge how to intervene within the boundaries of professional competence and the role of the counselling service
 - to acknowledge anxieties within the organisation
 - to plan interventions that are feasible within the resources available.
- 