

Workplace counselling competence framework

User guide

Workplace counselling competence framework
User guide

Copyright information:

Workplace counselling competence framework User guide is published by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, BACP House, 15 St John's Business Park, Lutterworth, Leicestershire, LE17 4HB.

T: 01455 883300 **F:** 01455 550243

E: bacp@bacp.co.uk **www.bacp.co.uk**

BACP is the largest professional organisation for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK, is a company limited by guarantee 2175320 in England and Wales, and a registered charity, 298361.

Copyright © 2026 British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.
All rights reserved.

Permission is granted to reproduce for personal and educational use only. Commercial copying, hiring and lending are prohibited.

Updates were made in August 2026 to align content relating to risk assessment and management with contemporary research.

BACP and the BACP logo are registered trademarks of BACP.

Contents

Executive summary	4
Background	5
Rationale for development	5
Methodology	5
About the competence framework	5
Definitions	7
Who is the competence framework for?	8
How to use the competence framework	9
Professional standards	9
Employment	10
Continuous professional development	10
Overarching benefits of a workplace counselling competence framework	12
Overview of the competences	13
Core competences for workplace counselling	13
Assessment and signposting	19
Areas of work	22
Meta-competences	24
Conclusion	25
Acknowledgements	26
References and further reading	27
Glossary	29

Executive summary

This document provides background information and user guidance for the BACP Workplace counselling competence framework. The framework identifies the competences required for workplace counsellors to practise safely and effectively.

Workplace counselling is increasingly in demand and widely acknowledged as a valuable way for organisations to support staff wellbeing. Subsequently an increasing number of paid or training opportunities are available to counsellors in this area.

This document aims to clarify the different contexts of workplace counselling and explain how the framework can be utilised for the benefit of all these contexts.

The need for workplace counsellors to maintain awareness, knowledge and understanding of current guidance or developments, which relate to the workplace, will also be examined further.

This document will also expand on how the framework can be an ethical touchstone for decision-making, development and training for both workplace counsellors and other invested individuals or organisations.

The framework is structured into the following four domains of competence:

1. Core competences for workplace counselling
2. Assessment and signposting
3. Areas of work
4. Meta-competences.

The rationales, principles and processes that informed the development of the competence framework are also included, along with definitions, key terms, and further details related to each competence.

It will discuss how the competences are aligned with the BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (EFfCP) to promote and maintain vigorous professional standards.

Background

The development of the Workplace counselling competence framework first began in 2015 with the recruitment of an external expert and the formation of a project board consisting of internal BACP staff. An expert reference group (ERG) was formed and an Information Analyst was engaged to undertake a systematic review of relevant literature. The project was temporarily paused but restarted in 2019 to complete the part developed framework.

Rationale for development

As more employers continue to choose counselling provision to respond to their legal responsibility towards the health and safety of their employees, it has been recognised by BACP that the unique aspects of workplace counselling warrant specific guidance and acknowledgement.

The Workplace counselling competence framework provides valuable information for workplace counsellors by focusing on the situations, ethical decision making, boundary issues, knowledge areas and legal areas that are unique to workplace counselling.

Methodology

The information analyst produced a scoping report from the systematic review, which was presented to the Expert Reference Group (ERG) and an external expert to ensure that the competences reflected current practice and developments in the field. Part of the ERG's role was to oversee the literature search and methodology to ensure rigour, and to build the competences from the evidence base; ensuring the competences accurately reflected the literature. A second ERG convened in 2019 to review and refine the competences that were partly developed in 2015.

The ERG included the external expert, representatives from BACP and experts with significant experience and knowledge in a range of workplace counselling contexts. The group met periodically to discuss and finalise amendments and additions to the framework.

This analytical approach focused on integrating the opinions and professional experience of ERG members including the external expert into the competence framework, whilst also considering relevant publications.

Following this development work, the draft framework was sent out for peer review. The peers were experts in the field of workplace counselling, who were invited to comment on the structure, content and language of the framework. Following discussion and implementation of the peer review feedback, the ERG and external expert signed off the competences, followed by a final sign off from BACP.

About the competence framework

The framework aims to define the competences, which specify the knowledge, abilities and skills needed to practise safely and effectively in workplace counselling.

"Competence can be described as **the combination of training, skills, experience and knowledge that a person has, and their ability to apply them to perform a task safely**. Other factors, such as attitude and physical ability, can also affect someone's competence." www.hse.gov.uk/competence/what-is-competence.htm

The framework examines the competences which are deemed necessary for workplaces counsellors to achieve and maintain for the benefit and protection of their clients, themselves, their overall practice, and continuous professional development.

The framework was developed to reflect the duties, responsibilities, and ethical issues that workplace counsellors are currently working with, whilst also being underpinned by evidence. While training opportunities may be identified from reading the framework, the aim is that counsellors will recognise their own practice and daily working life within the framework.

Definitions

• Workplace counselling

Counselling provided to an employee by their employer. This counselling may explore work-related issues, personal issues, or a combination of both. The counselling may be paid for by the employer or offered via a salary sacrifice scheme, at a reduced rate. The counselling may be offered via a variety of media, e.g. face-to-face sessions, telephone, online. The counselling could be part of a wider Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), which could also include the provision of legal and financial advice. The aim of workplace counselling is to enhance the wellbeing and functioning of the client, therefore restoring, or maintaining their fitness to work.

• Workplace counsellor

A counsellor who provides counselling that has been commissioned by the client's employer. The workplace counsellor may work within a variety of settings, for example an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) company, an occupational health department or self-employed practice. The workplace counsellor offers counselling to support a wide range of work-related and personal issues, using their specialist workplace knowledge to enhance and tailor the assessment, signposting and counselling provided to the individual client.

• Workplace counselling setting

The environment the counselling sessions take place in. This may be within an occupational health department, in the client's workplace, or if the workplace counsellor is self-employed in their home, office or other appropriate setting.

• Working knowledge

The level of knowledge required to work safely and effectively in a certain area. Whilst it is not necessary to be an expert or to know every aspect of the subject area at an in-depth level, this knowledge level does require awareness of and the ability to respond to any limitations of knowledge, experience, or remit. Therefore, in order to maintain safe practice, referral or signposting to appropriate specialist knowledge may be necessary.

Who is the competence framework for?

The intended audience for this framework includes, but is not exclusive to:



How to use the competence framework

The framework can be used:

- to write standard operating procedures and service guidelines
- to set standards in workplace counselling
- to inform person specifications and job briefs for recruitment
- to identify and clarify the duties and responsibilities of workplace counsellors
- to commission services
- to design and develop qualifications and training
- to reflect on personal and professional development
- to acknowledge the value and specialism of workplace counselling
- as a map for counsellors to identify CPD needs.

Professional standards

The framework documents workplace counselling specific professional standards, relating to areas such as record keeping, confidentiality and liaising with employers.

The competences can be a useful reference to inform service policies and procedures when they are reviewed, for service development initiatives, or updates to national/local guidance or the law.

The unique ethical decision-making situations workplace counsellors can encounter can be supported and informed by these specialised competences.

The framework can be referred to when communicating with invested parties such as commissioners, executive boards, or colleagues within a multi-disciplinary team, to substantiate and qualify the ethical grounding of decisions or service guidelines.

Employment

The framework encompasses the knowledge, understanding and abilities needed to practice as a workplace counsellor. Therefore, for organisations writing tenders to outsource workplace counselling services, the framework provides valuable guidance regarding the remit of workplace counsellors.

Equally, for the companies who bid for those tenders, the framework provides competences to guide recruitment of staff to fulfil bids for tenders. Person specifications, job descriptions, shortlisting criteria, interview questions and interview preparation can all be guided by the framework content, by integrating the stated skills and abilities into these documents and processes.

For line managers of workplace counsellors, the framework offers useful information to aid staff appraisals. In addition, it can be used to identify training and development opportunities, as well as learning gaps, by evaluating individual knowledge and abilities.

When creating or developing paid job opportunities for workplace counsellors, the framework can be referenced to quantify the value and range of relevant knowledge, experience, skills, and abilities the role offers. In this context, the framework may be utilised for the formulation of business cases or service proposals.

Continuous professional development

Another purpose of the framework is to offer a structured set of competences, which can be utilised by training providers when offering educational resources and experiences to enhance the practice of workplace counselling.

The framework outlines the competence areas necessary for workplace counsellors to possess, in terms of both a working knowledge of and correlating abilities for the role.

This offers an opportunity to identify learning gaps in teams and individuals, and formulate the appropriate training to fill those gaps. For individual counsellors, the framework can assist reflective practice and setting objectives for fulfilling relevant continuous professional development needs.

An aspiration of the framework is for a counsellor to recognise their own workplace counselling practice reflected in it, while also pinpointing areas where they would benefit from further training. In this way the framework can play an important role in maintaining and improving the quality of care to clients.

Applying the competence framework

The competence framework is intended to be utilised in conjunction with the following, as appropriate:

- BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (EFfCP) or the ethical code/framework to which the counsellor is affiliated
- Guidance from other relevant bodies e.g. ACAS, HSE
- Local and national guidance e.g. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)
- Internal policies of the client and counsellor's employers
- Pertinent legislation.

The broad range of competences should be recognisable to workplace counsellors, however not all will apply to every workplace counselling role or setting. Therefore, consideration should be given to the following when applying the competences:

- the organisational context of the counsellor's employer
- the organisational context of the client's employer
- the counsellor's current level of training and experience
- the counsellor's job description.

The competences should be applied with the aim of preserving and enhancing safe and effective practice within workplace counselling, keeping the client experience and safety paramount.

The competences include regard for the wellbeing and self-care of the counsellor. When applying the competences, thought should be given by both the counsellor and their employer to the impact on the counsellor from challenges, such as issue overload, volume or complexity of workload, working in a time-limited approach, vicarious trauma, and managing any incompatibilities between the position of the client's employer and the duty of care to the client.

At times, applying all the competences to an individual situation or decision may not be feasible. It may be necessary to identify the most fundamental competence or competences, which ensure acting in the best interest of the client at that time. Workplace counselling can involve unique challenges to this, as the employer can have some level of involvement and control in the counselling, outside of the therapeutic relationship e.g. authorising the number of sessions. The role of a workplace counsellor involves balancing these external influences and factors with the central ethical responsibility to the client.

Overarching benefits of a workplace counselling competence framework

The main motivation for creating the competence framework was to support, guide and acknowledge workplace counsellors, workplace counselling services, clients accessing workplace counselling and employers wishing to commission these services.

The primary overarching benefit of doing this was to provide professional standards to protect the current and future integrity and quality of the growing practice of workplace counselling. This, in turn, contributes to the efforts to improve mental health in the workplace and shines a spotlight on the importance of employee wellbeing.

The framework not only provides value to existing workplace counsellors but provides an informative educational gateway to ascertaining further training and development for counsellors who desire to work in this area.

Combined with the EFfCP, the BACP Workplace counselling competence framework now gives counsellors a tailored, expansive benchmark of the ethical and professional standards expected in their role.

This benefits the client's experience, as it requires counsellors to have the level of specialist knowledge, which can help clients in areas such as giving fully informed consent. The requirement for counsellors to work with an understanding of organisational contexts can help the client to understand and agree to the specific boundaries of employer-provided counselling.

The framework empowers and is accessible for all to utilise as a stable vantage point when growing, reviewing, and improving services to the client.

Consequently the client's quality of experience can be enhanced by counsellors and related parties striving to achieve the benchmark of standards in the framework.

The creation of this framework provides a valuable tool for employers of workplace counsellors, commissioners of workplace counselling, training providers, counsellors and clients to ensure that the counselling they are providing or accessing aligns with the principles, ethics and standards of BACP.

Overview of the competences

The structure and content of the framework was intentionally written in a concise, straightforward manner to support accessibility and use.

The aim of the structure was to mirror the structure of the work life of a workplace counsellor, documenting the skills they exercise, the knowledge they require and the ethical challenges they face.

The framework was structured into four main domains with nine sub-sections within them.

Core competences for workplace counselling

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

Workplace counsellors find themselves needing to balance workplace-specific legislation and ethics, in addition to the internal policies and procedures of both their own employer and the client's employer (if different), while working with the EFfCP and general legislation.

To manage the challenge of this, workplace counsellors are expected to have a working knowledge of employment-related legislation and policies that they can draw on when informing their client, making decisions, or liaising with the service commissioner.

Although some clients may be bringing purely personal issues to their sessions, work factors are more likely to have a presence or influence in workplace counselling. Possessing the relevant competences of an understanding of issues, such as disciplinary, grievance, bullying and employment contracts, can help to avoid a situation where the client feels the need to educate the counsellor in order for them to fully understand their frame of reference. For example, a client may refer or be referred for counselling due to stress related to a grievance they have lodged. If the counsellor has a working knowledge of this procedure and related implications the client may experience more therapeutic movement. The counsellor has the mechanical knowledge to support the ability to focus more on the emotional process and the unique intricacies of the client's experience while undergoing this procedure.

Confidentiality can appear to increase in challenges when practising in workplace counselling. There may be an increased chance of the counsellor receiving access to record requests due to grievances or tribunals. There may be agreements with the client's employer for the counsellor to release a certain level of information, which may include activities, such as reporting unattended appointments to the employer or providing a discharge summary report to the employer. The contract the counsellor agrees with the client at the commencement of the counselling must include any of these service specifics, so the client is giving explicit, fully informed consent. This calls upon the counsellor to understand and reconcile effectively the combination of GDPR, the EFfCP, the requirements of the organisation and the client's need for a safe therapeutic setting, with clear boundaries of what is kept confidential and what is shared and with whom.

Supervision for workplace counsellors provides opportunity to reflect on and examine these additional layers of confidentiality and ethics. A supervisor with experience of counselling for work-related issues may benefit the workplace counsellor's explorations, similarly to how the counsellor's knowledge can enhance the client's process.

The counsellor may find that they experience challenges unique to workplace counselling, such as pressure from the client's employer, conflicts between the service level agreement with the employer and duty of care to the client. There may be increased conflicts of interest due to the limited client base, including perhaps the referral of an alleged bully and the person making that claim or two clients referring who work very closely together. This can intensify the nuances needed when maintaining professional boundaries. The framework can be referenced to reflect on these responsibilities in supervision and balance them in a way that maintains safe and effective practice.

Understanding and working as a counsellor in the organisational context

The role of a workplace counsellor may involve counselling clients from multiple organisations, particularly perhaps if employed by an employee assistance programme (EAP). Knowledge of the organisational context of the client can aid effective signposting for further internal support and understanding the client's frame of reference in their work life.

The organisational context may influence aspects, such as the number of sessions on offer (time-limited or longer term), whether extensions can be requested, the location of the workplace counselling setting and referral pathways. The workplace counsellor needs to be competent to respond to these features while maintaining a high quality of care to the client. The counselling contract, service guidelines for the counselling provision and ethical dilemmas would all be influenced by and tailored to these features, while ensuring the client's psychological safety remains central.

Organisational knowledge can prove crucial when facing an ethical dilemma. For example, a line manager within an organisation may think they can request that a certain employee is prioritised on a waiting list. However, the workplace counsellor needs to consider both the confidentiality implications of having that discussion with that manager, and the consideration for fair provision for all clients on the waiting list. The counsellor could then use their knowledge of the internal support within that organisation to advise the line manager of other options available to the client, e.g. a stress management training/workshop.

Working within the organisational context is often a two-way process. Counsellors can convey organisational knowledge to the client and the counselling process, and also convey knowledge of the counselling service to the organisation, with an understanding of where the service can benefit. This requires a commitment from the counsellor to seek and maintain awareness of what the organisation can offer the client, and what the organisation's priorities are in terms of its needs from the counselling service.

The counsellor's own organisation, which may be different to the client's also has significance, as the counsellor may be working with their own internal policies and procedures, alongside those of their client's employer. The counsellor's own organisational context will determine the range of skills and abilities required in their job role, which the counsellor can intertwine with the EFfCP and the Workplace counselling competence framework. It will also determine the culture the counsellor works within and the options available to support their own wellbeing in work.

There may be more instances where a workplace counsellor is more at risk of encountering countertransference than a general counsellor would, due to these work contexts. For example, a client may refer, concerned about an impending restructure and anticipated redundancies. The counsellor may also feel job security concerns about whether this possible reduction in client demand will impact on their own employment, and these anxieties may be directed towards the client. The counsellor's knowledge, awareness and supervision will help address and resolve this.



Knowledge of the relationship between employment and health/wellbeing

Understanding how work factors can affect the health and wellbeing of an employee provides valuable contextual information throughout the counselling process. Counsellors may draw on this knowledge when helping the client to explore what is on the edge of their awareness or how to move forward, or perhaps access further help from provisions, such as occupational health.

Understanding how mental health can impact on workplace functioning, individual and organisational work performance, quality of work-life balance and wider public health are essential to this practice. This understanding may be drawn upon when supporting the client, promoting the counselling service, working with work wellbeing initiatives, liaising with the organisation, or working within a multi-disciplinary team. This background knowledge, while not always directly or explicitly applicable, enhances the ability of the workplace counsellor to empathise with the impacts the client may be feeling.

Combining workplace wellbeing knowledge with the organisational context and what the client shares can help the counsellor to step into the client's world, and work alongside them to improve their functioning in the workplace and overall quality of wellbeing.

Ability to establish brief interventions

Workplace counselling is often commissioned to be time-limited, short-term counselling. Working with a limited, fixed amount of sessions presents challenges for the workplace counsellor and client. It can increase the need for focusing during the counselling and considering which issues are more pressing to explore and will have a greater benefit to client's overall level of functioning and wellbeing.

Unlike some other areas of counselling, there can be a sense that there is a third party involved in the counselling – the client's employer. The control they can have over the number of sessions offered and any possible extension to this, when they have so many other connections to the client, including financial, wellbeing support, training, and development, can create ethical predicaments. This requires careful and knowledgeable navigation on the counsellor's part, while they strive to provide the client with a safe, confidential, space of therapeutic conditions but also need to be transparent, clear and informative regarding any limitations or requirements directed by the employer.

An ethical consideration, when the employer and counselling provider are determining the minimum number of sessions offered to each employee, is whether this number falls within safe and effective practice.

The number of sessions can be addressed, discussed and agreed during contracting. Six to eight sessions tend to be the average number, but the purpose of the work could suggest a different number. Psycho-education could effectively happen over one to four sessions; whilst working at greater depth is more likely to occur over four to 12+ sessions. Maximum session numbers do allow structure but can also be counterproductive. A skilled workplace counsellor will be able to negotiate an appropriate number of sessions to meet the client's agenda and needs. Due to the varying contexts and needs, it would be unethical to state the number of sessions for all workplace counselling. One size doesn't fit all, and the number of sessions should be tailored to the client's particular presentation.

If there is a waiting time between an assessment session and the counselling sessions, the assessment would usually be in addition to this number.

At all stages of the counselling, it is important for the counsellor and the client to have awareness of the time available and time left, so therapeutic focus and preparation for ending can be effectively applied.

Where an employer agrees to more sessions than initially offered, it is necessary to have a process for this, which allows time to plan for a safe and effective ending. The counsellor may want to reflect and explore in supervision any transitions from short-term to medium, or longer-term counselling and the impact of this on their own practice, ethical boundaries, such as client dependency, and their own self-care.

As work-related issues, such as grievances, disciplinarys, sickness absence and workplace investigations, may have a longer duration than the counselling, counsellors and workplace counselling providers will need to consider this both during the counselling and with regard to any policies related to future re-referral by clients. For example, some employee assistance programmes may permit only one referral per year per employee but may consider more if the referrals were related to different issues. While some providers may decide this on a case-by-case basis or have a time-period following discharge, which guides when a client may re-refer. Such a policy may also be driven by the consideration of managing client dependencies, as well as considering fairness of provision to the whole client base. This approach might be different for progressively embedded services and EAPs, where employees can access the support in a more timely and ad hoc way. Using the support proactively as well as reactively, an employee may attend several times in a year. This would allow the organisation the opportunity to provide the service and support needed in a fair, equitable and ethical manner.

Assessment and signposting

The competences documented throughout the framework sections are designed to ensure that workplace counsellors have the level of working knowledge to assess how, and to what extent, work-related issues are impacting on the client's functioning, or how workplace wellbeing may be affected by personal issues. The important identification from this is whether the workplace counselling can meet the client's needs appropriately, safely, and effectively or whether the client needs to be signposted or referred onwards.

Knowledge of the organisational context and wider provision of support play an important role here, as the client's experience of support, and consequentially the improvement to their functioning and wellbeing, can be greatly impacted by the suitability and/or amount of support they engage with.

Assessment can also be the appropriate stage for the counsellor to identify any dual roles or conflicts of interest, which could indicate the need for a different counsellor to see the client.

Although the workplace counselling provider has been commissioned by the client's employer, it is vital that safe and ethical practice remain paramount. For example, a workplace counsellor may decide counselling is not currently appropriate for the client, but they still provide a service for the client and the employer by both assessing this and referring or signposting onwards appropriately. This may be where a client needing urgent, crisis support due to safeguarding issues, or to ensure that clients who need long-term, more intensive psychological support, or potentially a mental health diagnosis, are referred appropriately. This can avoid the client intermittently and frequently referring to the workplace counselling provider without improvement to their functioning or wellbeing.

When assessing any clients who do re-refer relatively soon after discharge, the workplace counsellor may need to consider whether there is a real therapeutic need for counselling, especially when working with the constraints of a waiting list and client dependency .

A range of the signposting options a workplace counsellor may be considering is detailed as follows:



Risk assessment and response

When clients access counselling via their workplace rather than their GP, or a general service, they can feel apprehension about divulging their deepest thoughts, even when the confidentiality boundaries are clarified. This can be a particular consideration for counsellors when working with risk assessments.

Fear of their employer or future employers knowing they have experienced suicidal ideation, intent or behaviours, which may risk public harm, can deter clients from disclosing in counselling. Workplace counsellors face the additional challenge of helping the client to feel safe enough to be honest about such feelings, while also being honest themselves about the actions they will take in response to such a disclosure, referring to the counselling contract.

The workplace counsellor is valuably placed to help the client consider how work factors are supporting or exacerbating their feelings, and signpost to how the client may be able to seek further workplace support with this. The workplace counsellor's level of knowledge of available support options and process of referring onwards should be utilised appropriately so the client experiences a seamless transition between services.

To balance any concerns the client may have about their employer's role or knowledge in this situation, the counsellor can empower the client by striving to gain informed consent, wherever possible, at each response stage. Keeping the client informed of any responses, and the rationale for them, may alleviate their stress and any feelings of reduced autonomy.

When making risk-management plans, the counsellor can use their general workplace knowledge, and knowledge specific to their client's situation, to suggest a well-balanced range of both internal and external support options.

In the event of a perceived imminent risk connected to their client, the workplace counsellor will be considering their knowledge of the client's workplace and job role when evaluating any risk to the public and necessary response to this.

Affiliate counsellors may not have direct access to the workplace and would need to consult with an EAP case manager to understand and explore support options.

If a risk of harm from others is assessed, in terms of domestic abuse or stalking and harassment, the workplace counsellor is well placed in terms of role and framework competences to explain to the client how their employer may be able to support them. For example, an employer may implement adjustments to a client's work location or hours, to support them. The counsellor's knowledge and access to internal domestic abuse or safeguarding policies can provide further value in signposting and empowering the client.

Areas of work

Working with common workplace-related issues

Workplace counsellors need to maintain the abilities and understanding to work with the common work-related difficulties that many of their workplace clients may be experiencing.

As with knowledge of organisational context, the knowledge of workplace issues, their potential impacts on wellbeing and related organisational procedures or support options, can enhance the therapeutic experience of the client.

This knowledge should not supersede seeing the unique world of the client through their eyes. It should hopefully provide a shorthand of workplace understanding, that helps to achieve relational depth and gives the client increased autonomy regarding the pace of their process, as there is already a level of shared understanding when the counselling begins. This can be particularly valuable in the context of time-limited counselling.

Knowledge of the many facets of workplace stress and ways of managing or responding to this are essential to supporting clients presenting with this. It enables counsellors to help clients to focus on identifying the primary stressors, while reflecting on their own responses to stress and any potential for change or historic patterns related to this.

Maintaining an up-to-date knowledge of relevant policies, the type of occupational health provision the client has access to, and national bodies such as The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) can inform the counsellor's work and provide useful signposting information for the client.

The job description of a workplace counsellor would usually state the duty of working with a wide range of both work-related and personal issues. A workplace counsellor will naturally develop a level of specialist working knowledge in work-related issues, due to the vantage point of their role. This specialist knowledge can prove advantageous to the client in terms of the quality of support and the therapeutic process they experience.

Offering trauma support

It is important to first state that not all workplace counsellors will be trained to counsel clients presenting with severe or enduring trauma responses.

Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends an amount of therapy sessions and specific modalities of practice, which the workplace counsellor and their service may not be able to provide.

However, all workplace counsellors may be called upon to assess clients presenting with trauma, help to normalise their initial responses and identify where the client should be signposted or referred onwards to. Workplace counsellors need to recognise the symptoms of trauma and know when to refer for trauma specialist diagnosis and treatment.

In some settings, appropriately trained workplace counsellors may be able to offer psycho-educational support to groups of staff or group debriefing following a traumatic incident. Supporting staff who are experiencing trauma, perhaps due to a critical incident in work or even a personal experience, can have significant benefits for the wellbeing of the client and consequently their organisation and colleagues.

Meta-competences

Meta-competences for providing counselling in the workplace

The meta-competences are overarching competences, which summarise and solidify the range of competences needed to practise as a workplace counsellor.

They provide reference for the areas of knowledge and abilities, which require learning and continuous professional development to ensure a consistency of safe and effective practice.

The meta-competences focus on the skillsets, which are unique to or particularly relevant to workplace counselling. They outline the necessity for workplace counsellors to know the limits of their training and work within these limits.

Workplace counsellors can encounter many challenges to their professional boundaries and ethical principles, due to the nature of their work and the involvement of the employer – an invested third party in the counselling provision.

The counsellor needs to be equipped with the knowledge, understanding and abilities detailed in the BACP Workplace counselling competence framework, so they can manage the unique boundaries and intricacies of workplace counselling.

The counsellor who develops and retains these competences can offer an effective therapeutic relationship to the client, and service to the employer, promoting and supporting employee emotional and mental wellbeing in the workplace.

Conclusion

BACP foresaw that a BACP Workplace counselling competence framework would provide a necessary and helpful base of guidance for workplace counsellors, general counsellors encountering presenting work-related issues, and counsellors wishing to practise in this area. The framework was deemed important to maintain professional standards and to help focus on, and clarify, the appropriate knowledge required in this field.

The growing practice of workplace counselling has resulted in a variety of job roles and work settings within this field, and the framework provides common ethical threads, which feature throughout these varying contexts.

It was important that the ERG and peer reviewers represented a range of these contexts, along with a varying experience of the challenges and achievements workplace counsellors encounter.

Whether workplace counselling is provided via an occupational health department, an employee assistance programme (EAP) or private practice, the unique position of working with the client and the employer is shared. This characteristic of the provision can present specific ethical dilemmas, and the competence framework is tailored to these specifics, with the aim of offering a specialist, complementary addition to the EFfCP.

The framework acknowledges and supports the valuable work of counselling offered in the workplace and the potential consequential benefits to an employee's overall wellbeing and work-life balance. In a wider context, this can have positive impacts on a societal level, on organisational performance/finances and on public health.

The framework refers to common work-related issues and the possibility of encountering trauma amongst these. It highlights the working knowledge needed to practise safely and effectively in this field, alongside offering assessment, signposting, and referral onwards. This knowledge is drawn from a wide range of areas, including organisational context, related legislation, local and national policies, organisational policies and procedures and ethical frameworks. Continuous professional development is essential to maintaining this knowledge. The counsellor's self-care is also vital to maintain their own fitness to work, while helping the client to maintain or restore their own.

Just as employees strive to find a healthy work-life balance, the workplace counsellor exercises their ability to balance the requirements of the employer, the individual needs of the client and professional boundaries with the law, ethics and internal policies, while also keeping the client's safety at the heart of their work.

Acknowledgements

This project was commissioned by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). The development process first commenced in 2015.

The BACP project team was led by Traci Postings (Professional Standards Development Facilitator).

Professor Tony Roth from University College London was the External Consultant throughout both development phases.

A group of experts in workplace counselling provision and practice held formal meetings to progress the development of the framework. This expert reference group (ERG), included BACP staff and external experts.

BACP would like to thank the ERG members for their contributions to the creation and refining of the BACP Workplace counselling competence framework. Their experience in writing ethical frameworks and/or working in the field of workplace counselling provided valuable knowledge and skills to ensure the framework would be accessible, relevant, accurate, and supportive to all people and organisations connected to this specialist practice. BACP also wants to extend their gratitude to the peer reviewers; the kind giving of their time and expertise is greatly appreciated.

User guide written by Kerry Thorpe MBACP (Counselling Services Manager at Well Being Partners Occupational Health, Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust)

ERG members

Traci Postings

BACP Professional Standards Development Facilitator

Fiona Ballantine Dykes

BACP Chief Professional Standards Officer

Eve Orton

BACP Operations Manager

Kris Ambler

BACP Workforce Lead

Tony Roth

External Expert and Clinical Psychologist of University College London

Julie Hughes

Chair of BACP Workplace and Senior case manager at Mind Matters Counselling LLP

Nick Wood

BACP Workplace executive and Head of Counselling Service at Gloucestershire County Council

Kerry Thorpe

Counselling services manager at Well Being Partners Occupational Health NHS Joint Venture, Wroughtington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust

Elaine Adams

Clinical director at Network of Staff Supporters (NOS) Employee Assistance Programme and counselling providers

Malcolm Smith

Head of psychological services at People Asset Management (PAM) Employee Assistance Programme and counselling providers

Jessica Sullivan

Clinical director of Care First Employee Assistance Programme

Anne Scoging

Head of Advisory & Counselling Service at London Fire Brigade

References and further reading

Acas

www.acas.org.uk/supporting-mental-health-workplace

BACP Workplace Division

www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-divisions/bacp-workplace

Business in the Community (BITC)

www.bitc.org.uk/wellbeing

Bullying and the Workplace

www.acas.org.uk/if-youre-treated-unfairly-at-work/being-bullied
www.gov.uk/workplace-bullying-and-harassment

Citizens Advice

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/work/problems-at-work

Department of Health (DOH) Improving lives: the future of work, health, and disability

www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-the-future-of-work-health-and-disability

Domestic Abuse and the Workplace

www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/domestic-abuse-toolkit

Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA):

<https://www.eapa.org.uk/>

Equal Opportunities

www.equalityhumanrights.com/en

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

www.hse.gov.uk/index.htm

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng116/chapter/Recommendations#management-of-ptsd-in-children-young-people-and-adults

Self-harm: assessment, management and preventing recurrence

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng225>

Staying safe from suicide (NHS)

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/staying-safe-from-suicide/>

Time to change

www.time-to-change.org.uk

Thriving at Work: the Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers

www.gov.uk/government/publications/thriving-at-work-a-review-of-mental-health-and-employers

World Health Organisation (WHO)

www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/en

Glossary

Absenteeism

An employee's intentional or repetitive absence from work. This can result in decreased productivity and morale for the workplace setting and have a detrimental impact on company finances among other aspects.

Boundaries

Ethical, moral, legal, or organisational structures, which protect both the counsellor and client from harm and encourage safe and effective practice. An ethical framework outlines professional boundaries and aims to inform counsellors of the competences needed to maintain their own.

Bullying

A repeated behaviour, which results in physical or emotional harm to the recipient. This behaviour could be face to face, online, via email or phone and can include name calling, unfair treatment, assault, and threats. Employers have a responsibility to prevent bullying in the workplace.

Burnout

A state of physical and/or mental exhaustion induced by prolonged, chronic work stress, resulting in disengagement from work, reduction in quality of personal wellbeing and reduced professional efficacy.

Business case

A compilation of the statistical evidence, rationale, and benefits of a proposal for a project, task, or initiative.

Competence and competence framework

A competence is the ability to fulfil a task effectively and safely. A competence framework compiles the competences required to work in a specific field of practice.

Confidentiality

A principle of keeping and protecting information in a state of privacy.

Conflict of interest

A situation where the aims or concerns of two parties are incompatible to the point where one or both parties could potentially act in line with an agenda or be perceived to, rather than act in the appropriate interests of the other party.

Continuous professional development (CPD)

An ongoing process of acquiring, maintaining, and developing skills relevant to a field of practice.

Crisis Team (Adult Assessment Team)

A team of mental health professionals who provide specialist assessments, advice, and signposting to adults with severe or moderate and complex mental health problems. This service is operated on a 24 hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week basis.

Critical incident

An event or series of events, which are sudden, outside of the normal experience, and involve a perceived threat to life and potential to overwhelm a person's capacity to cope in the short or long term. This could involve assault, death in service or serious injury.

Critical incident debrief

This may be offered in group or one-to-one setting, where the experience of a critical incident can be talked about and the effects of it can be normalised. The debrief aims to promote resilience, recovery, and signposting to further support, should it be needed.

Dual relationship

The instance where multiple relationships exist between two people. In workplace counselling, an example would be a counsellor receiving a referral from a client who was also their colleague, or the person in the organisation who the counsellor liaises with, and who is commissioning their services.

Empathy and empathising

The act of trying to sense and understand a person's feelings and experiences to the point where you can see their world from their perspective with compassion and without judgment.

Equal opportunities

The principle of all people being deserving of the right to be treated without discrimination, bias, or prejudice; regardless of race, sex, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation etc.

Ethics and ethical practice

Principles defining a right and wrong way to act, which then operate as a moral compass to guide safe, good quality working practice, effectively protecting the client and counsellor from harm or sanctions.

Expert Reference Group (ERG)

A group who combine their expert experience and opinion to contribute to a time-limited project prior to implementation.

Focusing

The skill of sensing awareness in the client of emotions, which may not be fully in the client's awareness but could be pivotal to their therapeutic movement. Focusing can involve concentrating on one area and being attentive to the physical feelings of that emotion to aid verbal expression by the client.

Frame of reference

Where the counsellor can feel and view the client's perspective, with empathy and appreciating that the client is the best expert on themselves, while striving to sense their current emotional experience.

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

A regulation in EU law which provides protection for individuals regarding data protection and privacy. It outlays how data should be collected, recorded, stored, and transferred, while upholding the rights and consents of the individual the data are related to.

Grievance

A grievance procedure enables employees to formally raise an issue when they feel it has not been resolved by raising it informally.

Harassment

Behaviour which is intimidating or offensive to a person. If this behaviour is connected to a protected characteristic, it is illegal under the Equality Act 2010. Employers have a responsibility to prevent harassment in the workplace.

Issue overload

The detrimental impact to a counsellor's wellbeing and/or practice when their caseload includes multiple clients with the same presenting issues. This can make it challenging and tiring for the counsellor to remember and separate each client's process.

Leaveism

An employee taking annual leave, flexi time or time owed rather than taking sick leave, or to catch up on a backlog of work.

Mediation

A discussion between an independent, impartial, suitably trained mediator and parties who are experiencing difficulties that informal procedures have been unable to resolve. The aim is to find a solution and way forward.

Multi-disciplinary team

A team which combines the professional expertise of a range of practitioners to provide an integrated service. Roles could include counsellors, nurses, doctors and physiotherapists in workplace settings.

Occupational health

A specialist area of medicine, which is concerned with the protection and promotion of health in the workplace. Large employers may have their own in-house occupational health service, which usually includes a multi-disciplinary team.

Organisation

A group of people working together towards a common purpose or goal, such as a business.

Peer reviewer

A person who evaluates the quality, accuracy and content of a publication or article related to a field in which the peer reviewer is also highly experienced.

Presenteeism

An employee being physically present in the workplace but not fully functioning, due to physical or mental illness or injury.

Reasonable adjustments

A change in the work environment or role to ensure that workers with disabilities, or physical or mental health conditions, are not substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs.

Relational depth

A state of the client and counsellor experiencing a high level of trusting engagement, with the counsellor feeling able to empathise deeply and show high acceptance while still being transparent.

Service level agreement

A commitment between a service provider and a client, which details the levels and characteristics of expected delivery and possibly penalties if these targets are not reached.

Stress risk assessment

An assessment, which evaluates stressors in the workplace for an employee and identifies how the employer and employee can reasonably reduce those stressors for the benefit of the employee's wellbeing.

Supervision

The meeting between a counsellor and suitably qualified supervisor where the counsellor's work is discussed and reviewed. Supervision supports the maintaining of professional standards, identifying learning needs and reflecting on the counsellor's self-care and fitness to practise.

Terms and conditions of employment

These include the employment conditions, rights, responsibilities, and duties stated within a contractual agreement between an employer and employee.

Therapeutic process/movement

The therapeutic process encompasses all the content of the counselling sessions and the client's and counsellor's reflections between those sessions. Therapeutic movement refers to changes in emotional or cognitive state or perspective that the client experiences during counselling.

Vicarious trauma

When a helper empathises with and is exposed to the trauma presentation of another person and begins to experience trauma symptoms and a changed perspective as a result.

Wellbeing

The combined state of happiness, quality of mental health, quality of physical health, purpose, meaning and satisfaction with life that a person feels.

Whistleblowing

A worker who reports wrongful activity in the workplace. Whistle-blowers are protected by the law.

Work-life balance

This is the division of a person's time, energy, mental and emotional focus between their work activities and their personal activities e.g. family, friends, leisure, and self-care.