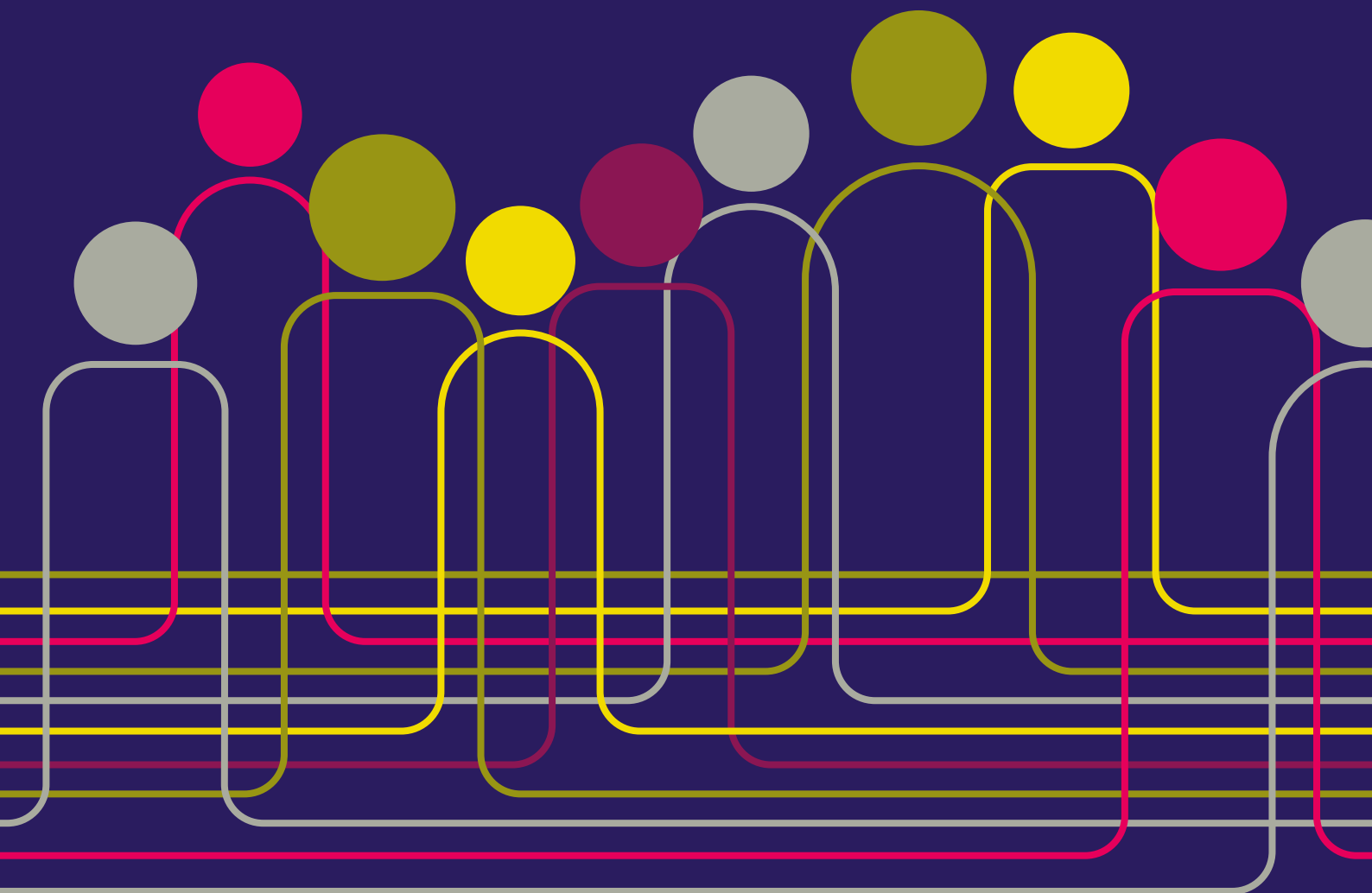


# Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions 2026

Working ethically is working  
within relationships



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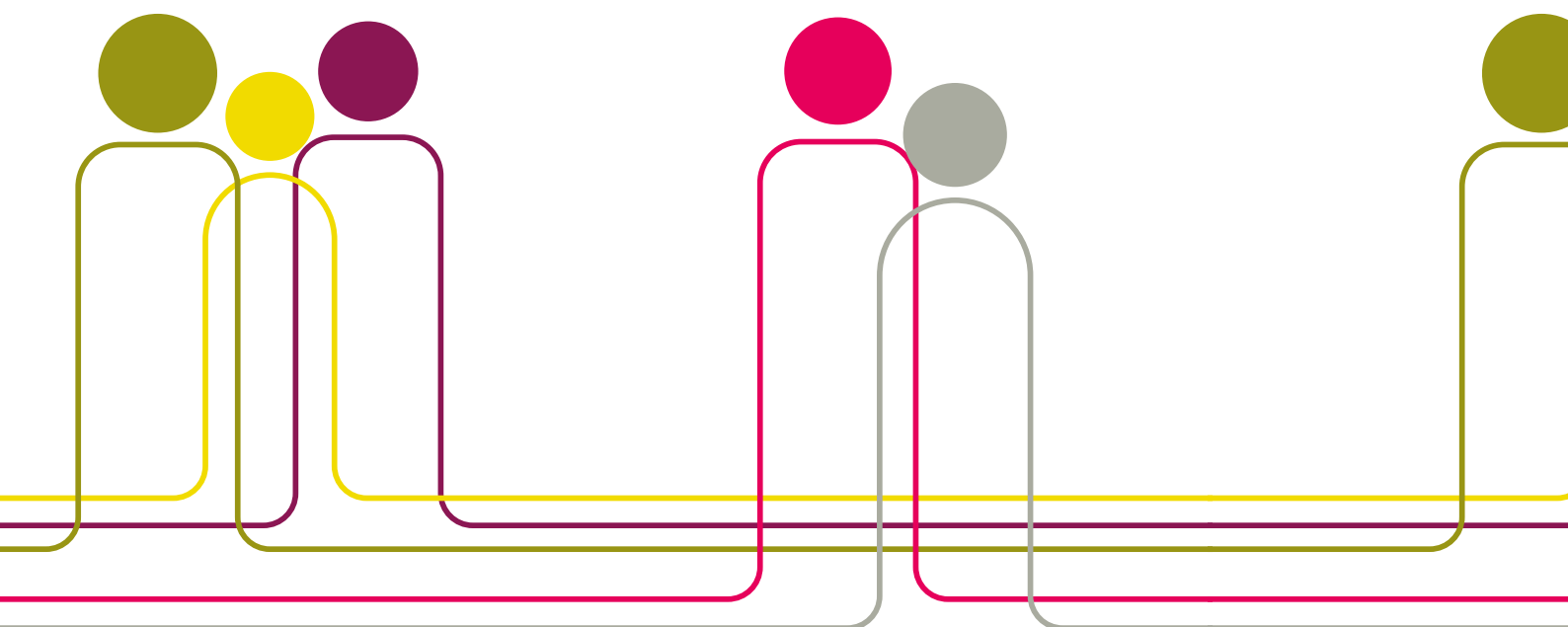
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# Introduction

The *Ethical Framework* sets out the expected ethical standards for BACP members.

All members and registrants of BACP are committed to abide by the *Ethical Framework* which is made up of three sections:

- A Working ethically within relationships**
- B Ethical principles**
- C Core responsibilities**

Members recognise that our registration with BACP may be at risk if we fail to fulfil the commitments set out in this framework. We have committed to use these three sections to: inform decisions, explain the reasons behind our ethical decisions and work in practice in our professional role.

The *Ethical Framework* commits members to working collaboratively, where possible and appropriate, with the people using our professional services and accounting for our ethical decision-making by providing reasons for decisions made.



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## Who should use the *Ethical Framework*?

1. The framework is intended to be used by all members of BACP as the basis of all their professional work and relationships within the counselling professions, including work with clients and service users, supervisory work, training and research. Members must uphold the good reputation of the profession in all their actions and relationships, so members are also committed to these same principles, responsibilities and ethical relationships as set out in the *Ethical Framework* in their relationships with colleagues, other professionals, BACP and the public. The framework should be used by practitioners (counsellors, psychotherapists and coaches at all membership levels) working directly with clients; by supervisors, trainers, organisational members, courses and services who are accredited by BACP or provide BACP approved qualifications, or by members using counselling skills in their work.
2. The *Ethical Framework* will be used by BACP Professional Conduct panels as a reference point concerning the standards expected of members, to inform decision-making when considering complaints against a member.

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## Using the *Ethical Framework*

There are three main sections of the *Ethical Framework*, all of which need to be considered and used to inform your decisions. These are:

1. **Working ethically within relationships:** This section gives some context for the *Ethical Framework* and explains what is meant by working ethically within relationships. It gives guidance on how to develop a rationale for ethical decision-making and needs to be used alongside the **Ethical principles** and **Core responsibilities** to inform ethical reasoning and decision-making.
2. **Ethical principles:** these principles underpin all sections of the *Ethical Framework*.
3. **Core responsibilities:** these responsibilities refer to the fundamental principles of good practice that form the foundation of a safe, trustworthy, and respectful professional service.

**Within this *Ethical Framework*, the emphasis is on:**

- working ethically within relationships
- ethical decision-making and
- being able to give ethical reasoning for any decisions we have made.

The *Ethical Framework* is supported by *Ethics in Practice* and *Ethics Essentials* resources and other supplementary resources, which give more information to support members with their ethical decision-making, ethical reasoning and ethical practice.



## Working ethically within relationships

Working ethically and making ethical decisions are an integral part of all relationships, including professional relationships within the counselling professions. As members of BACP we are committed to consider ethics as we make decisions in all of our working contexts and the implications of our actions outside our professional relationships, ensuring we do not bring the profession into disrepute. We must work collaboratively with people using our services, wherever possible and appropriate, to decide on actions that promote fairness, equality and justice. We must embed ethics within all of our relationships in ways that are respectful to all parties, including ourselves.

We must also work in ways that are mindful of the **Ethical principles** (section B), and consistent with the **Core responsibilities** (section C), that underpin this *Ethical Framework*.

We must be able to explain our reasoning for decisions made and actions taken, and justify planned future courses of action, including how we might need to respond to any unforeseen events. To be able to do this, we need to identify those factors that inform our decision-making and, wherever possible, demonstrate that the decision-making has been undertaken collaboratively, as far as possible, with those who will be impacted by these decisions.

As the nature of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching, supervision and training is often uncertain, unpredictable and challenging to accurately predict and navigate, there is often not a 'right' or 'wrong' answer. Decisions made and actions taken should always be with the intention to ensure fairness, equality and justice, in line with this *Ethical Framework*.

## A rationale for ethical decision-making

There are many ways in which we as members can work with people using our services to make decisions on a case-by-case basis. We must be able to give a rationale that explains our reasoning and an account of the internal and external factors that informed the decisions we made, and actions taken; such as (but not necessarily limited to):

- **Internal factors** which may include specific aspects, such as age, culture, gender, disability, sexuality, religious belief, race or ethnicity, as well as the nature of the work undertaken, the context for the work, and the contract agreed. They could also include ethical principles underpinning the work such as transparency and honesty, and any actions taken, or agreed, in respect of collaborative decision-making.
- **External factors** which are those factors that sit outside the relationship but may impact the relationship or, in turn, be impacted by decisions made in the relationship. These might include the legal obligations and duties a member is generally bound by, the context of the work, other people involved, such as family, friends and other services (if client work), or organisational expectations and requirements for all work, for example.

**Our rationale for ethical decision-making needs to include answers to the following questions:**

1. What are the ethical issues?
2. What steps, if any, will be taken to engage the person to be impacted by the decision (client, supervisee, trainee, organisation, research participant, for example) in the decision-making process? If we are not doing this, or this is not possible, why not?
3. What are the relevant internal factors considered in the decision-making process? How will they impact the decision you make?
4. What are the relevant external factors considered in the decision-making process? How will they impact the decision you make?
5. What decision(s) were made and actions taken? What was the outcome of them? Were they consistent with the **Ethical principles** and **Core responsibilities** set out in the *Ethical Framework*?
6. How was the process reviewed, and with whom?

Developing a rationale using these and other relevant questions can be helpful to inform discussions with others, such as supervisors and managers.

When keeping a record of your rationale, you must always be mindful of your duties in relation to confidentiality and data protection obligations more broadly. There may also be occasions when such a rationale is required by others, which must also be recorded in a way that is consistent with good practice around record keeping, and with sufficient detail to provide an account of the decisions made and actions taken.

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## Collaborative process

A collaborative process is a fundamental aspect of all ethical practice and decision-making in counselling, psychotherapy, coaching, supervision and training. Collaboration, which considers identity and diversity, involves taking deliberate steps towards mitigating potentially harmful power dynamics and inequalities between people. A need to work collaboratively can arise in various scenarios, which will include collaborating on how a piece of work will be undertaken.

**As we develop our rationale for ethical decision-making as shown above, we can use these additional steps to further support our collaborative ethical decision-making:**

1. Consider whether you can and should discuss the ethical issue with the person who will or may be impacted by the decision (client, supervisee, trainee, organisation, for example), including the key factors of any actions we may need to take. (See 'When collaboration might not be possible', below, for further guidance.)
2. Listen to the person's perspective and any concerns they have.
3. Personally reflect on the ethical issue, discussing with supervisor or colleagues, as appropriate and if time allows.
4. Consider any legal, contractual or organisational duties we may have, and how the **Core responsibilities** and **Ethical principles** set out in this framework should be applied.
5. Review and identify learnings, including recording decisions made (with reasons) and actions taken.

Discussions around shared decision-making between us and others involved in those decisions must be clearly recorded and agreed. This supports transparency and accountability in practice and helps us to articulate a rationale for decisions made and actions taken.

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## When collaboration might not be possible

There may be instances where collaboration might not be possible, due to temporary and permanent factors, and where there are statutory responsibilities that need to be met, including (but not necessarily limited to):

- **Temporary factors** might include issues around a person's capacity, including mental health distress, risk, age, understanding and a willingness on behalf of the person to engage in a collaborative dialogue
- **Permanent factors** might include context (where a person's actions or decision-making capabilities are constrained through law, for example), or **statutory responsibilities** where there is a legal requirement to report concerns, e.g. for safeguarding reasons
- **Personal preferences of others** may include occasions where the people we work with will not want to work collaboratively
- **Contracts and context of work** – our commitment through the application of this *Ethical Framework* is to collaborative working, however, there may be occasions when our contracts for work, or the context where we are working, specifically exclude collaborative working. Where this is the case, the reasons need to be documented clearly.



# Ethical principles

**Ethical principles** relate to those aspects of the work in the counselling professions that facilitate and enable the relationship at a process level. These principles can be used alongside the **Working ethically within relationships** and **Core responsibilities** sections of the *Ethical Framework*, to enable us to form an ethical rationale and make ethical decisions in our practice.

**The principles underpinning all therapeutic services are:**

- **Confidentiality:** Maintain the privacy of all information shared in the context of our work, only disclosing it with the service user's consent, or when required or permitted by law, or as set out within the **Core responsibilities**
- **Honesty:** Being truthful
- **Transparency:** Ensure people are fully aware of what services are being offered, the qualification of those offering the service, any changes to the service provision and any risks, benefits and alternatives that may be available
- **Do no harm:** Do no harm to people using our services, which includes avoiding actions that may cause physical, psychological, or emotional harm
- **Best interest:** Act in the best interest of those using our services by promoting their wellbeing and taking positive steps to help them and prioritising their needs
- **Respect:** Respect the right of those using our services to make their own decisions and support their ability to act independently, wherever possible
- **Fairness:** Treat all clients fairly and in line with equality law obligations, providing equitable and inclusive access to services
- **Anti-oppression:** Be aware of relational power dynamics, ensuring relational power imbalances do not create or lead to marginalisation or minoritisation
- **Trust:** Ensure all our actions are based on, and informed by, a commitment to trust
- **Collaboration:** Wherever possible, work in partnership with people to agree how we will work together
- **Compassion:** Hold compassion and kindness at the core of all our work
- **Integrity:** Be transparent and ethical in our dealings with others.

These principles are embedded within, and informed by, the **Core responsibilities** and **Working ethically within relationships** sections of the *Ethical Framework*.



# Core responsibilities

**Core responsibilities** refer to the fundamental principles of good practice, without which, no professional services can be considered safe, trustworthy or respectful. These **Core responsibilities** need to be used together with the **Ethical principles** and **Working ethically within relationships** sections of the *Ethical Framework* to make ethical decisions in our practice.

**As members of BACP, we must:**

1. Build appropriate relationships.
2. Keep ourselves and those using our professional services safe.
3. Understand and act on our legal and professional responsibilities.
4. Deliver services to expected professional standards.

---

## 1. Build appropriate relationships

**We will:**

### 1.1 Treat people with respect

**To achieve this in our professional role we must:**

- a) work in partnership with people in making decisions about how we will work together.
- b) ensure all communications are respectful and accurate.
- c) not abuse our position by taking unfair advantage of people.
- d) make reasonable adjustments and ensure fair and impartial provision of services.
- e) uphold people's right to dignity, respect and equality.
- f) avoid making assumptions about people, recognising diversity and individual choice.
- g) treat colleagues, other professionals, BACP and those using our services with kindness, courtesy and respect.

## **1.2 Give people the information they need to make choices about their work with us**

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a)** be honest about our work and provide clear, accurate information about services offered, our level of qualification, experience and our competence to undertake that work.
- b)** provide people with a record of our working agreement.

## **1.3 Establish and maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries**

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a)** avoid any dual or multiple relationships that could cause harm.
- b)** respect people's personal boundaries.
- c)** not have sexual relationships with, or behave sexually towards clients, supervisees, trainees or research participants.
- d)** ensure there is a clear boundary between our personal and professional social media, digital accounts and ensure that public communications, whether personal or professional, reflect the ethical principles set out in this *Ethical Framework*.
- e)** not act in a way which has the potential to bring the profession into disrepute.

## **1.4 Work collaboratively to resolve ethical dilemmas or challenges**

**To achieve this, we must be able to demonstrate:**

- a)** that when ethical issues arise, where appropriate, we have engaged in collaborative decision-making with those we work with (apart from where collaboration is not possible as detailed in section A).
- b)** that where ethical issues arise, we deal with them promptly.
- c)** that we consult regularly with our supervisor about ethical dilemmas or challenges.
- d)** our ethical rationale and reasoning, including the steps we have taken to resolve the dilemmas or challenges.

## 2. Keep ourselves, colleagues and those using our services safe

**We will:**

### 2.1 Take account of our own personal safety and the safety of those we work with

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a) ensure we are competent to work with the people who use our services.
- b) ensure physical, digital and remote meeting spaces are private and free from intrusion.
- c) take responsibility for our own personal safety.
- d) work in partnership with people in considering their needs around their personal safety when accessing our services.
- e) assess the risk of any artificial intelligence tool (AI), digital tool or online platform, before using them. Be able to demonstrate that we:
  - i) are competent to use the tool or platform.
  - ii) understand how data are handled and stored, and any risks to confidentiality and that we have mitigated any associated risks as far as possible.
  - iii) are honest and transparent with people about our use of AI, digital tools or online platforms, and the benefits and risks involved with their use.
  - iv) have the informed consent of those using our services before inputting any of their personal data into AI or digital tools.
  - v) have not deferred or outsourced our decision-making to AI tools. We remain responsible for critically evaluating AI output and for any subsequent decisions we make based on its advice or suggestions.

### 2.2 Be honest and transparent with those who use our services about anything that has not gone to plan in our work together

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a) explain fully and promptly what has happened, including the likely effects, and apologise to the person or people affected.
- b) act promptly to limit harm and meet any legal obligations.

## 2.3 Maintain our health and wellbeing

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a) monitor and respond to our psychological and physical health needs.
- b) ensure we are sufficiently resilient to undertake work with the people using our services.
- c) seek appropriately qualified and experienced professional support and services as required.

## 2.4 Act appropriately to protect people from harm

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a) have adequate training and all the necessary safeguarding policies and procedures in place to protect adults at risk, children and young people.
- b) ensure those using our services have access to the details of our safeguarding policies and procedures, and details of who to contact if they have concerns.
- c) understand our legal obligations relating to the disclosure of safeguarding concerns and share information if we believe people are at risk of immediate serious harm in line with those legal obligations and our own policies.
- d) not attempt to change or suppress the sexual orientation and/or gender identity of those who use our services, which includes not seeking to change or suppress their expression of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

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### 3. Understand and act on our legal and professional responsibilities

**We will:**

#### 3.1 Protect the confidentiality and privacy of those accessing our services

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a) respect people's rights to privacy and uphold our duty to keep information shared confidential.
- b) understand and comply with all data protection responsibilities in our country of practice, for instance in the UK this would include the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR 2021).
- c) have a clear and accessible privacy notice that outlines all key information including, how personal data are collected, used, stored and protected in accordance with relevant data protection laws, including what rights people have in respect of these data.
- d) give clear information to people within our privacy notice. Ensuring those using our services are aware of and agree to any foreseeable limitations to confidentiality, including any legal obligations we may have to disclose information and the use of digital storage systems, platforms or tools that may monitor or collect data.

#### 3.2 Keep appropriate records

**To achieve this, we must ensure that the records:**

- a) are factual, adequate and relevant for the type of service offered.
- b) are stored securely and comply with the data protection requirements of the country where the record is stored.
- c) include all communications, notes and other information held relating to clients or service users working with us within the records we keep of our work.

### 3.3 Act on our responsibilities in reporting serious crime and safeguarding concerns

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a) ensure we are aware of, and comply with, legal obligations in both the country where we provide professional services and the country of residence of those using our services, particularly in relation to:
  - i) child abuse
  - ii) safeguarding concerns
  - iii) suicide risk
  - iv) serious crime.
- b) be mindful that our legal obligations may vary depending on the jurisdictions in which we provide services.
- c) where necessary, make reports to the appropriate authorities in accordance with our legal obligations.

### 3.4 Be financially responsible

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a) ensure we are aware of, and comply with, tax obligations in the country where we provide professional services, including reporting requirements. Be aware that obligations may differ depending on the country in which we work.
- b) provide clear and transparent information to the people using our services about our fees, including when and how payments are to be made and how and when fees will be reviewed.

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## 4. Deliver services to high professional standards

### 4.1 We must be competent to deliver the services we offer

**To demonstrate this, we must:**

- a) possess the appropriate qualifications, training and experience necessary to competently deliver the services we offer.
- b) discuss within supervision our competence to undertake work with specific client groups and contexts.
- c) be aware of and comply with the legal obligations relevant to the services we offer, in both the country where we provide professional services and the country of residence of those using our services.
- d) keep our skills and knowledge up to date.
- e) uphold BACP's Register's Terms and Conditions and adhere to BACP's disclosure policy.

### 4.2 Have adequate insurance

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a) ensure that we have and maintain appropriate professional indemnity and liability insurance cover for the services we provide for:
  - i) all UK practice whether this is conducted online, remotely or in person
  - ii) all aspects of our cross-border work in all the countries in which our professional services are delivered and in which we and the people using our services live, unless prior BACP approval for non-compliance has been granted.

### **4.3 Have adequate supervision that enables us to reflect in depth about all aspects of our practice**

**To achieve this, we must ensure that:**

- a)** we have confirmed with supervisors that they have the necessary qualifications, experience and competence to supervise our work in accordance with the BACP supervision competence framework.
- b)** regular supervision is undertaken in accordance with BACP membership requirements, the practitioner's level of experience, training and caseload.
- c)** supervision is independent of line and case management.
- d)** we collaborate with our supervisors on ethical dilemmas and challenges arising through our work.
- e)** there is agreement with the supervisor about who holds key responsibilities for clients.

### **4.4 Treat people fairly**

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a)** set out clearly the services we have competence to offer.
- b)** not, in the delivery of our services, unlawfully discriminate against people on the grounds of their protected characteristics which include: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
- c)** understand and comply with equality, diversity and inclusion obligations.
- d)** be flexible and make reasonable adjustments for those we work with, where necessary and possible.

#### **4.5 Manage breaks, endings in ways that minimise the impact for clients and service users**

**To achieve this, we must:**

- a)** inform clients or service users about any limits to the number of sessions, or types of services offered.
- b)** inform clients or service users with reasonable, advance notice of any planned breaks.
- c)** provide clients or service users with reasonable, advance notice when approaching an ending where it is safe to do so.
- d)** manage any unplanned breaks or endings to minimise the risk of harm and disruption for clients and service users.
- e)** ensure we have a clinical will in place and have appointed an executor who, bound by confidentiality, can communicate with clients and service users if we are unable to contact them ourselves, or if we die.

