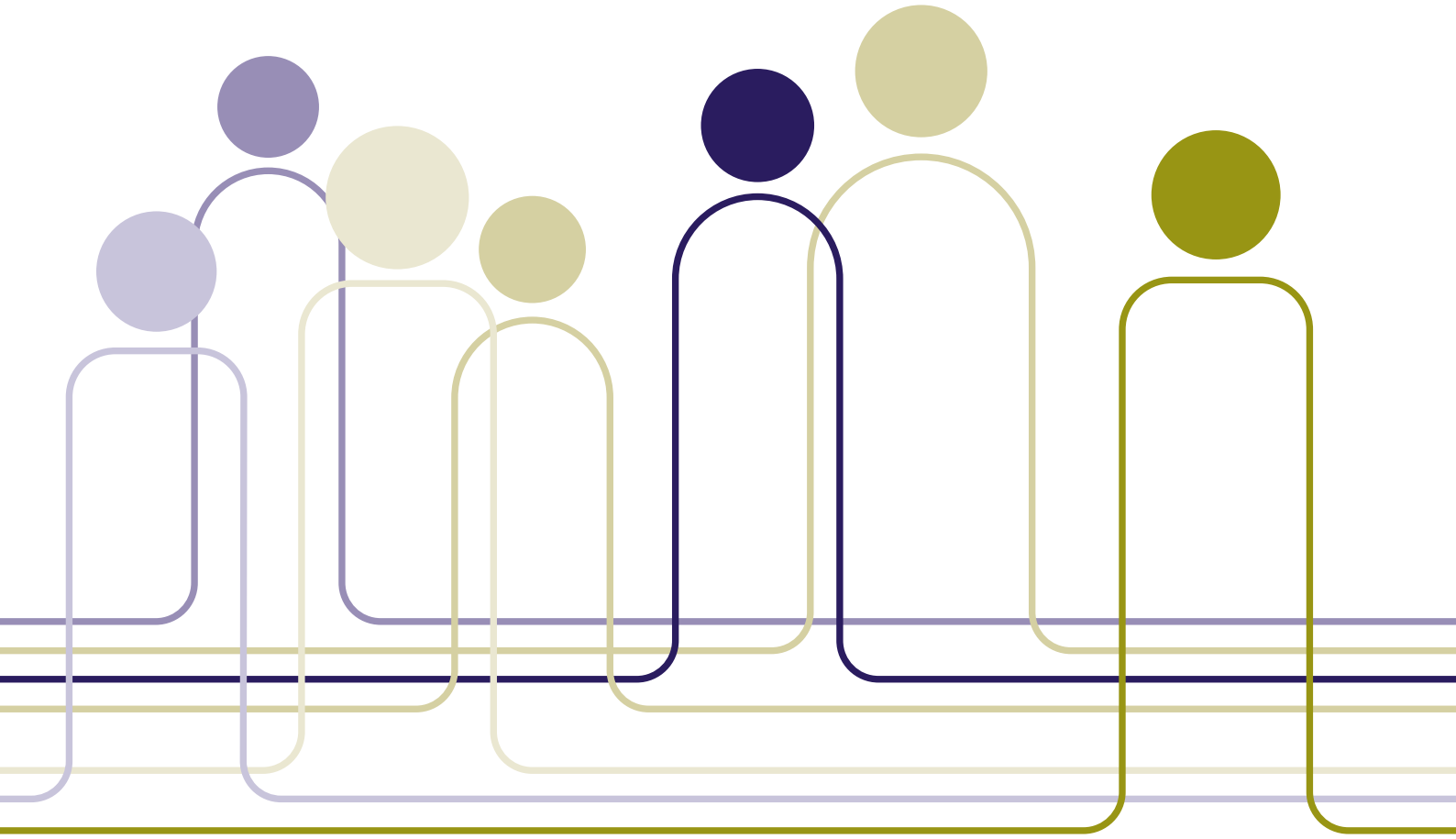
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004.1

Dual roles within the counselling professions



Fact sheet

Ethics in Practice

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with BACP's current *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of building appropriate relationships.

Using Fact Sheet resources

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

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

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

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

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

The term 'practitioner' is used generically in a wider sense, to include those who work in the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and research.

Introduction

It is likely that we will all as practitioners be faced with ethical dilemmas relating to dual or multiple relationships at some stage of their practice. The BACP *Ethical Framework* (2026) (EF) provides the foundations that underpin the expected ethical standards for BACP members and describes the core components for practice.

When considering issues of dual relationships we need to integrate all three sections of the *Ethical Framework* (EF 2026). Section A addresses the importance of working ethically within relationships, Section B gives us the principles that underpin such ethical practice, and Section C describes the core responsibilities that ensure our work is safe, trustworthy and respectful. Section A also includes a helpful rationale and a process for ethical decision-making. The decisions we make and the actions we take should always be with the intention of ensuring fairness, equality and justice consistent with the EF.

Core Responsibility 1.3a states that as practitioners we must: 'Establish and maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries … we must avoid any dual or multiple relationships that could cause harm.'

Many problems relating to dual relationships are the result of poor contracting, so being clear about boundaries at the outset may prevent difficulties later. It is also important that we hold in mind the difference between what might be considered to be crossing boundaries perhaps going beyond what would normally be acceptable but may be justified when it's clearly in the interests of the client and what would always be considered to be boundary violations, for example a sexual relationship with a current client.

1 What are dual relationships?

Dual relationships involve counsellors being in more than one role in relationship to clients (Reeves and Bond, 2015).

Situations where a dual relationship might occur include:

- Training: a practitioner may also be a trainer
- A practitioner and client being on the same training course
- Other work, for example the client is the practitioner's GP
- Having friends in common, in person or on social media.

Dual relationships may be simultaneous or subsequent. Many would clearly be unethical if they occurred simultaneously, but the situation could be very different if one relationship followed another. For example, you might be very concerned if a current client joined your yoga class, but would you feel the same two years after the work came to an end?

2 Why would we become involved in a dual relationship?

Before becoming involved in a dual relationship, we may need to ask ourselves some questions such as:

- Do we have a genuine reason to take on this role?
- Is there another solution?
- Does the relationship fill an emotional need for us as practitioners?
- Are there any personal, professional or financial gains for either party or anyone else close to them?
- Could anything be viewed as a bribe or inducement?
- Business relationships or other professional services offered in lieu of payment may be common practice in some cultures; is there a risk of causing offence if I don't take this into account?

Pope and Vasquez (1991) warn that viewing a dual relationship as beneficial for the client may be a way a practitioner justifies inappropriate behaviour or evades responsibility which is clearly manipulative and unethical.

3 Issues with dual relationships

As stated, the EF (BACP 2026) stresses the centrality of working ethically within relationships and offers a rationale for ethical decision-making. It identifies the ethical principles of confidentiality, honesty, transparency, do no harm, best interest, respect, fairness, anti-oppression, trust, collaboration, compassion and integrity, all of which should underpin our thinking as we consider whether or not a dual relationship is justified in a certain situation.

3.1 The case for and against dual relationships

There can be both positive and negative outcomes that may result from dual relationships (Gabriel (2006, pp. 6–21). As practitioners, we always need to consider what harm may result as soon as we realise that one may occur or is perhaps already occurring (Core Responsibility 1.3).

In some settings, dual relationships are unavoidable, for example in prisons, the military, the police, where under certain circumstances, therapy and other interventions are compulsory and where the practitioner has responsibilities to both the organisation and the individual. However, for some clients with complex mental health issues, particular care should be taken before engaging in dual relationships, (Zur 2015).

Pope and Keith-Spiegel (2008) hold the view that nonsexual boundary crossing can strengthen the practitioner/client working relationship and, if handled sensitively, may sometimes benefit the therapeutic process.

For example, in some contexts, such as church communities volunteering with a particular charity, clients may be drawn to a practitioner who they feel they can trust just because of a shared belief system or a significant personal life experience, and perhaps the fact that a client sees us struggling in a gym class may become a useful discussion point if they are working through perfectionist issues.

Dual relationships may be common and unavoidable in small or rural communities where we may meet clients in several contexts, for example in shops, at the school gates, the doctor's surgery, the gym or sports club. Familiarity with us may in fact be the stated reason why a client asks us to be their therapist.

Avoiding dual relationships may become even more difficult if we are the only person in an area offering a particular specialism, for example sign language, working in a foreign language, addiction or psychosexual counselling, or a modality such as EMDR or Dialectical Behavioural Therapy. It may also be difficult for us as practitioners to find a therapist for ourselves if the need arises.

However, with the increased option of online therapy, some of the above situations may now be resolved more easily.

Within education is another context where dual relationships may be found. For example, a practitioner may be on the teaching team at a local school or college and may find their clients are also their students or their teaching colleagues.

However, if a dual relationship arises without the full understanding and collaboration of those we work with, they may see us as unprofessional, lose faith in the process and in us as practitioners, decide not to continue the relationship and leave in a worse position than when they started. Clients may experience conflicting feelings of anger and a fear of being separated from the practitioner, may feel they've been exploited, but also feel dependent on the relationship.

They may feel guilty for no reason or assume they've done something wrong and may feel unable to voice their discontent with us because they view us as an authority figure, so the dual relationship continues, yet they hold back and feel silenced (Herlihy and Corey 1992).

The degree of harm can vary considerably, ranging from very little to a high probability that significant and permanent damage may result. Power differentials require continual monitoring in any professional relationship, and introducing a secondary element complicates this further and may intensify the power imbalance. It is also clear that we may hold different views about what constitutes ethical practice depending on our context and theory base.

When issues of power are involved, we need to be particularly alert to any identity characteristics and intersectionality and diversity issues, visible or invisible, that may perhaps increase the scale of power or privilege in any potential dual relationship (Khan, 2023, pp. 88–95).

Similarly, in a supervisory or training context dual relationships can have harmful effects on supervisees or trainees. As trainers and supervisors, we are in positions of power, and we need to remember that trainees may be dependent on our professionalism and expertise.

Perhaps the most important factor is that we consider all issues carefully from an ethical perspective and thoroughly discuss any potential consequences with the client/trainee/supervisee. It is the making of an ethical decision, and our honesty, transparency and collaboration with those we work with tend to make the difference as to whether the experience is positive or negative for all involved. We can use the ethical decision-making rationale from the *Ethical Framework* to support and record our decisions

3.2 The impact of dual relationships on practitioners

The Ethical Principle of 'best Interest' and the Core Responsibility of 'not acting in a way which has the potential to bring the profession into disrepute' (Core Responsibility 1.3.e BACP 2026) require that we reflect on the balance of possible implications and consequences of our decisions.

Entering dual relationships without thought or awareness of the implications can have serious legal outcomes, and significant and possibly career-ending consequences. Formal complaints' procedures may risk practitioners losing professional credibility and registration as well as personal respect within their community.

The EF requires us to 'Maintain our health and wellbeing' (Core Responsibilities 2.3 BACP 2026) which may cause dilemmas if we have a varied social life in our work location. For example, should a practitioner who regularly trains for swimming events in the only pool within a 30-mile radius, abandon their main hobby because a client becomes the new aqua aerobics instructor? Similarly, a practitioner may find that someone they work with joins the 12-step programme that they themselves attend.

If we avoid all possibilities of chance encounters with clients, we could neglect our own wellbeing although there may be some situations where we decide not to attend a social occasion because it could cause difficulties in our professional relationship with someone we work with.

3.3 Sexual dual relationships

The EF states: 'we must not have sexual relationships with, or behave sexually towards clients, supervisees, trainees or research participants' (Core Responsibilities 1.3.c BACP 2026).

The issue of sexual relationships with current, or previous, clients has been heavily debated; sexual relationships with current clients are always ethically unacceptable and may even be illegal, for example, if working in a school or prison. Whereas sexual relationships with current clients are prohibited, intimate relationships with former clients, supervisees or trainees may be more complex.

Many believe that sexual relationships with anyone we provide a service to are a violation and are therefore forbidden for life, although some organisations stipulate a specific period. However, questions may still remain.

Before any practitioner contemplates sex with former clients, they should seriously consider:

- Has the therapeutic relationship ended? How might any transference or countertransference issues contaminate a romantic relationship? Has sufficient time elapsed to ensure any therapeutic dynamics have come to an end?
- What were the issues brought by the client? If they mainly related to relationship, sexual or attachment issues, will a sexual relationship with this person be complicated by power differentials that could be difficult to overcome or be damaging?
- Is the practitioner willing to be professionally accountable by discussing the possibility of such a relationship in supervision?
- Are both parties entering into a sexual relationship on an informed and consensual basis?

3.4 Dual relationships in different contexts

The EF (BACP 2026) applies to counsellors, psychotherapists, coaches, supervisors, trainers, research participants and organisations who are accredited with BACP, or members using counselling skills in their work. It also applies to relationships with colleagues, other professionals, BACP and the public.

Practitioners who are also trainers or supervisors may have complex and potentially contradictory obligations. They have a duty to respect client confidentiality, but also a professional obligation to the educational setting should issues arise that raise concerns about the competence of a student to practise. Herlihy and Corey (1992) explain that a student's autonomy may be affected if they worry that disclosure may adversely affect their course, other students may lose respect for the trainer or institution or believe that the student is receiving special privileges because of the dual relationship.

3.5 Dual relationships and social media

The EF states: 'we must ensure there is a clear boundary between our personal and professional social media, digital accounts and … communications'. (Core Responsibilities 1.3.d BACP 2026).

Posts on social media may inadvertently reveal personal information about us and our family. Our contacts may be connected to a current or past client and therefore finding information about us is easy if a friend tags us in a post. How might a client knowing personal information about us affect our professional relationship? It is also possible that we may be 'friends' with someone who is currently working with a colleague.

Requests from those we work with to connect on social media should be handled with care. For example, it is clearly inadvisable to become 'friends' on Facebook with a current client, but perhaps an ethical case could be made for connecting on LinkedIn, a professional site, with a former client who is now training to be a therapist.

Further issues to consider when using social media include:

- Would having two separate accounts, one strictly for professional purposes and another for personal use, prevent some dual-relationship problems arising?

- What degree of privacy settings are needed, and could this vary depending on the purpose of the account?

For more information about issues of social media see the BACP Ethics Hub.

4 Ethical decision-making in respect of dual relationships

4.1 What do I need to take into consideration?

Throughout the EF (BACP 2026) there is ethical guidance relevant to working with dual relationships which practitioners need to adhere to. It states: ' 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;'. It also stresses the importance of collaborative working.

The Ethical Principles of 'Do no harm' and 'Anti-oppression' and the Core Responsibilities include requirements that we 'Build appropriate relationships', 'Keep ... those using their professional services safe' and, specifically, '... avoid any dual or multiple relationships that could cause harm' (Core Responsibility 1.3.a BACP 2026). The EF also requires that we 'Work collaboratively to resolve ethical dilemmas' (Core Responsibility 1.4) and 'Be honest and transparent with those who use our services ...' (Core Responsibility 2.2) and that we 'Keep appropriate records' (Core Responsibility 3.2 BACP 2026).

In reflecting on these principles, we need to consider the following:

- What is the nature of the dual relationship, who holds the power?
- How are the people in the relationship impacted and how do they feel about it?
- How do I work collaboratively with the other person to resolve this?
- Are there any possible legal/GDPR issues that may be relevant?
- If the first relationship is historical, consider the length of time since your previous relationship, your client's current mental health status and how the relationship ended.
- What is the purpose of the dual relationship? Who proposed it, who may benefit from it, and how?
- Are there any personal motivations for this dual relationship?
- What transference or countertransference have you identified?

- Is there a conflict of interest in the proposed dual relationship?
- Could the dual relationship impair your professional judgment or objectivity?
- Are the power dynamics of the first relationship likely to be mirrored in the second relationship? Could there be any shift in power: who would be favoured and what might the consequences be?
- Are there any identity/intersectionality characteristics that need to be considered?
- How compatible is the dual relationship with a therapeutic relationship?
- What could happen if I choose to proceed (or not) with the dual relationship? Could anything be misinterpreted?
- How can this dual relationship realistically be avoided?

We also need to:

- Discuss the situation in supervision and consult colleagues who may hold conflicting opinions to our own to get a balanced perspective.
- Obtain informed consent from those we work with after discussing potential risks and benefits.
- Document all discussions and outcomes of any dual relationship roles.
- If necessary, refer the client to another professional.

If we realise that a dual relationship has been in place for some time without our recognising it, we still need to review the above points to clarify our thinking and then take appropriate action.

Depending on the situation, we may decide something needs to change, or we may need to talk to the person we're working with to raise mutual awareness of the situation. We need to be able to justify our decisions, to explain our concerns and give them plenty of opportunity to express their opinion and ask questions. They may disagree with our decision, but if we believe it to be correct, both ethically and professionally, then we must stick by it.

4.2 Ongoing monitoring of dual relationships

Dual relationships can change or may end at some point, and the decision-making process may need to be revisited regularly as the relationship develops.

We need to be open to discussing unexpected problems or conflicts that may emerge due to a dual relationship. If necessary, the dual relationship should be ended in a manner that causes the least harm. Corey (2009, pp. 71–77) explains how continued self-monitoring demonstrates a professional outlook in working through day-to-day ethical complexities.

5 Application to practice

The following section is aimed at translating the theory covered in this resource into practice with short case studies. It also gives you the opportunity to think about your own therapeutic practice by offering questions for you to reflect on.

5.1 Case study: Diana and Peter

This case study raises issues of:

- Professional and social dual relationships
- Knowing confidential information about third parties
- Potential limitations on practitioners' social activities
- Dual relationships in a training context.

Diana works as a counsellor at an agency located in a town 10 miles away from where she lives. She is fully engaged in local life, sings in a choir, attends the parish church, and is a member of the tennis club.

Diana has been working with Peter for six months and is aware of his difficult relationship with his brother, Simon. Despite this, they are considering sharing a house in the future. Peter mentions that Simon has always been an enthusiastic tennis player, that he will be representing his club in a tournament the following weekend, and that Peter is considering going along to watch. As there is a tournament at her own club that weekend, Diana wonders whether Peter's brother could possibly be the same Simon who she knows in her own tennis club, and who also attends the same church as she does.

Although alerted to a potential problem, Diana decides that this could just be a coincidence and that in any case it probably wouldn't raise a boundary issue as she won't be attending the tournament, so their paths won't cross. Nothing more is said, but Diana continues to wonder about it, and although she takes no action, she recognises that she is tempted to ask Simon if he has a brother.

Diana plans to attend the club's annual party with friends. Two weeks before the event, Peter mentions that he is going to a party at Simon's tennis club in a fortnight's time which rings further alarm bells as it seems increasingly likely that the Simon Diana knows is in fact Peter's brother. She is distracted by this for the rest of the session but decides to say nothing because she wants time to think about it and to discuss the situation with her supervisor.

Diana brings this dilemma to supervision and they identify the following options:

- raise the question in her next session with Peter
- say nothing and, if Peter attends the party, be led by his response
- say nothing and, if Peter attends the party, try to avoid him
- not go to the party
- resign from the tennis club.

She decides to talk with Peter at their next session, which will give him the option of not going to the party if he is uncomfortable about meeting her in a different context and a public space. She is therefore perturbed when Peter emails her to say that he is travelling for work and unable to attend their session that week. This means that the next time they meet will be after the date of the party.

Her dilemma is now increased as she considers whether she should email Peter about the situation but decides against it as there is still no confirmation that he is Simon's brother. The agency also has firm protocols about anything but the most minimal client-counsellor contact between sessions. Diana decides to hope for the best and go to the party with her friends, intending to avoid Peter should he be there, and to address the situation in their next session.

Her heart sinks when she arrives and sees Peter already enjoying a drink with Simon. He seems surprised but pleased to see her, offers to buy her a drink, and obviously wants to have a chat. Diana is unnerved, declines the drink and indicates that she is joining friends. She spends the whole evening regretting the fact that, when contracting, she hadn't discussed with him what they would do if their paths were to cross elsewhere.

At their next meeting Peter expresses how lovely it was to see her at the party, that he will be moving in with Simon in the near future, plans to join the tennis club and get involved in the church. He then suggests that they might meet for a drink at the club next Saturday.

When she explains that this wouldn't be appropriate because of their professional relationship, he says he quite understands, how about when they finish working together? He generally gives her the impression that he thinks she is making a mountain out of a molehill.

He also adds that he's been thinking about training as a therapist and he's really hoping she will advise him on different models and local training courses and, in the future, become his supervisor. She stumbles over her response and says she will have to think about it.

5.1.1 What's my view?

Which of the above decisions would be consistent with the Ethical Framework (BACP 2026).

How could I use the ethical decision-making rationale to support any decision I make?

- Are Diana's decisions consistent with the Ethical Principles and Core Responsibilities BACP 2026?
- Diana knows confidential information about Simon? What might the impact be on him if/when he discovers this?
- What do I think Diana should do about Peter's suggestions regarding his future training?

5.1.2 How does it apply to my practice?

- Diana discussed her options with her supervisor but not with colleagues or agency staff. What would I have done?
- Am I aware of any potential issues of dual relationship in my current practice? If so, am I 'hoping for the best'? Should I be 'planning for the worst'?
- Do I consider professional and social dual relationships to be different?

5.1.3 Further reflection

- I need to remember that ... there is often not a right or wrong answer. EF (BACP 2026).
- I need to remember to keep accurate records of all my reflections and my decision-making process.

5.2 Case study: Paula and Anne-Marie

This case study raises issues of:

- The impact of dual relationships in a training context
- Power and intersectionality issues in a training context
- Confidentiality issues in a training context.

Paula is a counsellor in private practice and also a course tutor for a counselling course in the local College. Anne-Marie, whose first language isn't English and who grew up in a particularly male-dominated culture, has been a client of Paula's for 18 months and the therapy has focused on her lack of confidence which has its origins in power dynamics in her early life.

The therapy has gone well, and Paula and Anne-Marie have agreed that it should end soon. As they work towards an ending, it is clear that Anne-Marie very much appreciates the therapeutic relationship that has been established.

At the beginning of the next term Paula is surprised to see that Anne-Marie has registered for a counselling course which she is scheduled to tutor and in which she will be assessing both Anne-Marie's written and practical work. Paula also remembers that English isn't Anne-Marie's first language which is an identity characteristic that could potentially affect the scale of power in the tutor/student relationship.

She reflects on the impact that all this might have on their relationship, even though this is now in the past, and wonders whether it would be possible to swap tutorial roles with a colleague. However, she hesitates to talk with her line manager as this would mean disclosing confidential information about Anne-Marie, although not doing so will leave her in a potentially difficult dual relationship situation.

She takes her dilemma to supervision, and they explore the following options:

- Invite Anne-Marie to a confidential conversation to explain and explore the situation with her.
- Inform Anne-Marie in case she wishes to withdraw her application.
- Have a confidential conversation with her line manager to explain the situation.
- Withdraw from her course tutor role without giving the reason.
- Leave well alone and hope for the best.

5.2.1 What's my view?

- Which of the above decisions would be consistent with the *Ethical Framework* (BACP 2026)?
- How could I use the ethical decision-making rationale to support any decision I make?
- Can I see any way in which this situation could have been avoided?
- Would it be different if the therapy was still current?
- Do I consider professional and social dual relationships to be different?

5.2.2 How does this apply to my practice?

- Have I ever found a dual relationship developing after the work has ended?
- How aware am I of issues of intersectionality and how they may affect the scale of power?

5.2.3 Further reflection

- When starting work with a new client we cannot foresee whether a dual relationship may arise in the future.
- Addressing potential dual relationships at the outset, however unlikely they may seem, may prevent a lot of difficulty in the future.
- Attitudes towards dual relationships have changed over time and may still change in the future.

Summary

We need to remember that there is often not a 'right' or 'wrong' answer. Dual and multiple relationships may sometimes be unethical, harmful or abusive, but this is not always the case. If possible, we should address any potential dual relationships when contracting and follow the EF rationale and process for ethical decision-making (BACP 2026). We need to pay particular attention to issues of power and intersectionality.

The key is to assess all aspects of the situation, consult our supervisor and trusted colleagues, be transparent with those we work with and honest with ourselves. We also need to ensure that we review our decisions frequently and keep accurate records.

About the author

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Acknowledgement

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