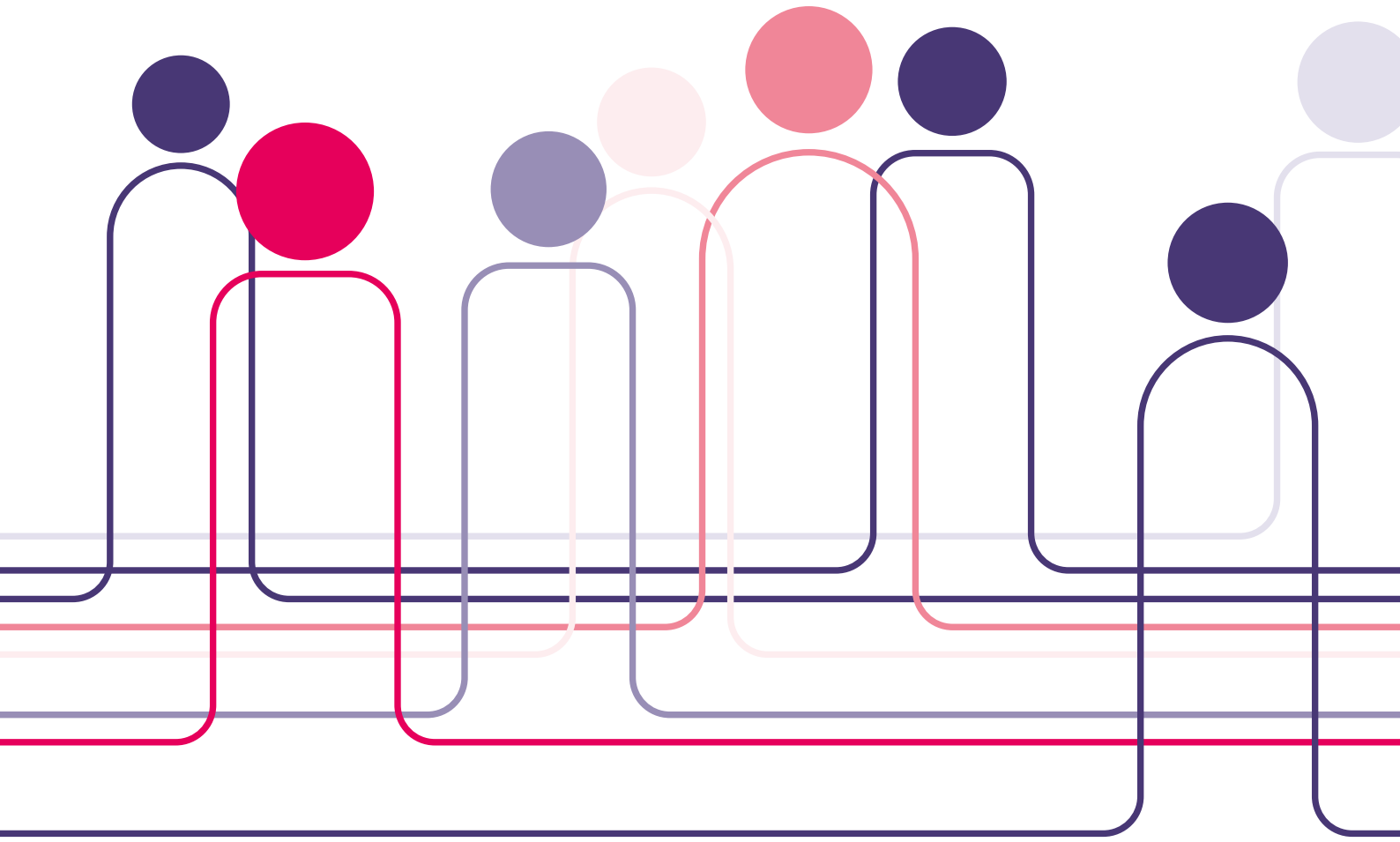
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Use of social media in the counselling professions



Checklist

Ethics Essentials

The *Ethical Framework 2026* commits us to working relationally and keeping to the principles and core responsibilities within the Framework. The Framework applies to all of our professional relationships, and this includes how we present ourselves on social media.

What is social media?

It is a collective term for interactive technologies and applications that facilitate the sharing of information, ideas and other forms of expression through virtual communities and connections.

Social media platforms and networks are now used by many for marketing purposes as well as for professional networking and sharing of ideas. These are constantly evolving, dynamic spaces that have an immediate impact, creating opportunities for individual voices to be heard which can be facilitative, decrease stigma and increase social inclusion.

However, these opportunities also carry risks through the instantaneous and often unmoderated nature of the material shared. For some they simultaneously risk becoming places of threat, bullying and inappropriate behaviour. Counselling practitioners can and should take steps to help ensure that their presence in these spaces remains thoughtful and always maintains high ethical standards. For further information see the Online Safety Act (2023).

Separate personal and professional social media groups

It is widely accepted that social media now has a powerful impact on political agenda-setting and the development of society more generally.

Many practitioners will have both a personal and a professional online presence and face the challenges of maintaining boundaries between these two areas of self-presentation.

We are committed through the *Ethical Framework* to establish and maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries and we must '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*' (EF 2026, Core Responsibility 1.3d).

Although we may take considerable steps to separate personal and professional identities, this is not easy to maintain due to the nature of social media platforms. Having separate accounts or using different social media channels for different purposes can be helpful, as can careful management of privacy settings. Nonetheless it is important to remember when posting in any setting that all social media carries an implication of publicity, and posting also creates a permanent record even if the post is subsequently deleted.

Check your digital footprint

Anything we publish online in a public or semi-public place such as a social network contributes to our digital footprint. (A digital footprint is any data that are left behind when users have been online, whether deliberately posted or passively collected via IP addresses, cookies etc.) It can be helpful for practitioners to schedule a regular review of their footprint which includes the following:

- Entering your name into several search engines
- Revisiting privacy settings
- Creating strong passwords and changing them regularly
- Keeping software up to date
- Reviewing apps on devices and deleting those no longer needed or used
- Keeping an inventory of any smart household devices involving internet access; ensuring that any limits to security and privacy involved are understood and carefully managed
- Regularly 'cleaning up' devices by deleting histories, cookies etc.

Confidentiality

Those who work in the counselling professions are required to preserve the anonymity and privacy of clients in all contexts. Even in closed groups, we cannot be sure that clients are unable to access posted material. This makes social media spaces inappropriate as a location for discussion of specific client material, even where it is anonymous and heavily disguised.

Reflect before posting anywhere

Anything we post online represents who we are and influences how we are seen by others. It can be confusing for clients to experience a very different impression of the practitioner in social media from the one presented to them in their confidential counselling sessions. It is often possible for clients to engage with a practitioner's social network(s), either with or without the practitioner's knowledge.

It is important to hold this in mind when posting on any platform, ensuring that, within the post, no identifying information is shared which relates directly to specific client work or which might compromise any therapeutic relationship in any way and that any language/imagery used is respectful and appropriate.

Model good behaviour

The internet makes it possible to reach a significant number of people instantaneously; the role of moderators in professional groups is a very important and demanding one. There is a difficult balance to strike between the right to free speech and the need to protect personal data and reputation. The Online Safety Act provides further information and guidance in this respect.

Professionals can play a part in helping colleagues maintain the commitments made to others in accordance with the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* by modelling good behaviour themselves.

Look at BACP guidance on the use of social media

Many professional organisations have developed a specific code of practice for posting on social media. Information for BACP members can be found at www.bacp.co.uk/membership/membership-policies/social-media.

Use supervision

While it may seem strange to discuss your social media activity with your supervisor, it can be a way of ensuring that anything posted remains professional, and that personal activity is kept separate. It can be very helpful to seek an outside view of online activity, and the supervisory relationship offers a safe and helpful opportunity to do this. However, some supervisors may be less familiar with the world of social media than their supervisees and, in such situations, you might contact another trusted colleague with relevant experience being careful to respect client confidentiality.

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