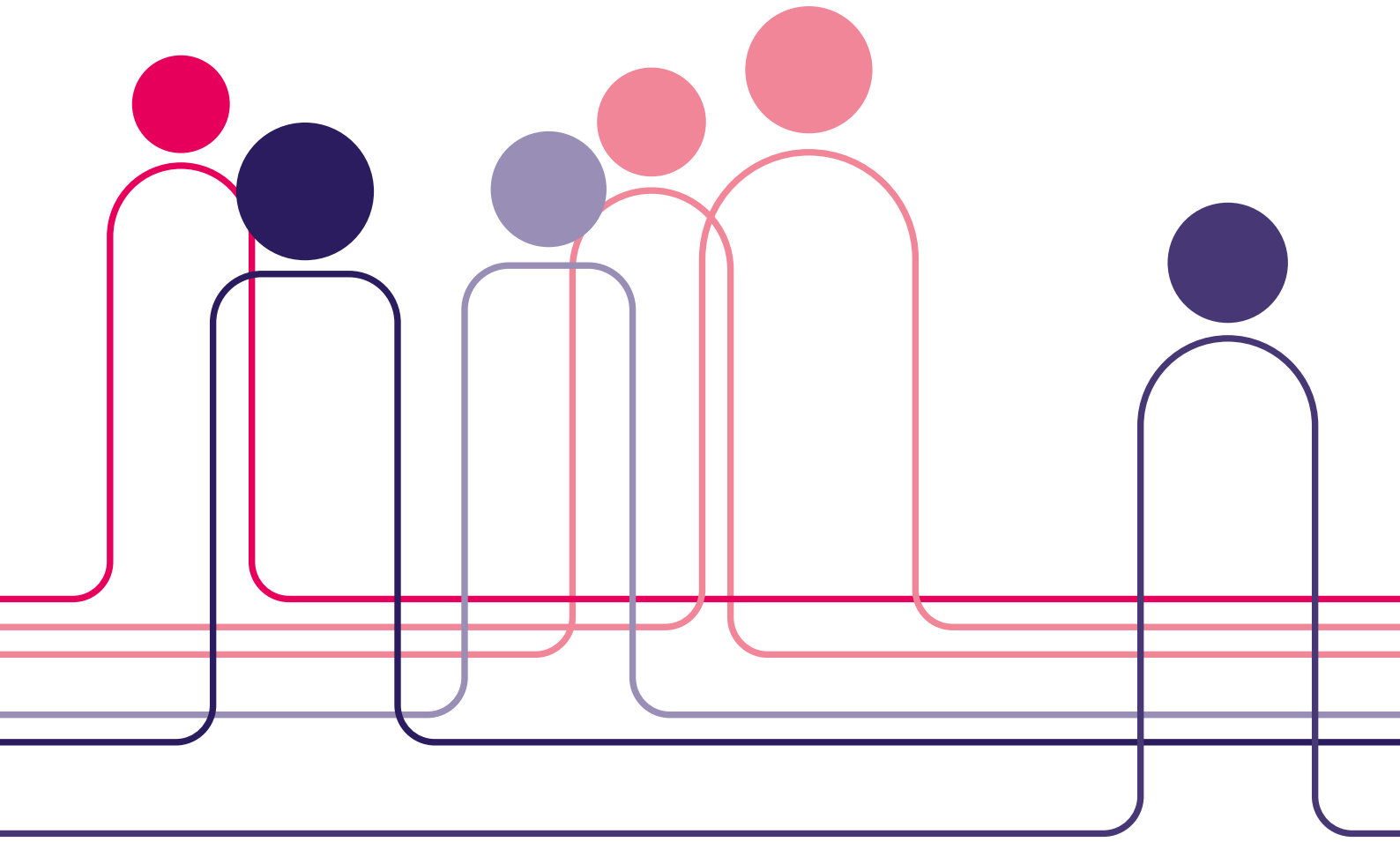
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Dealing with inappropriate behaviour from clients or service users



Checklist

Ethics Essentials

How to identify behaviours that are considered unacceptable, report inappropriate contact and get advice and support.

What is inappropriate behaviour?

Counselling involves therapists working with a range of specialisms, including sex- related issues. However, we're also aware that boundaries can sometimes be crossed, leaving counsellors feeling uncomfortable if the behaviour they receive is inappropriate.

There are two main terms describing contact between two adults that could be considered inappropriate:

- **inappropriate activity:** Behaviour, often sexual in nature, that is not suitable for the particular relationship - for example between a client and a counsellor.

- **inappropriate contact:** Contact, including touching, that is not suitable for the time and place. Often used to describe physical advances made in the workplace.

Inappropriate contact can occur in several different forms:

- electronic (email or social media)

- written (letters or notes)

- verbal (by telephone or skype)

- face-to-face.

If you receive inappropriate attention, communication or repeated contact that makes you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to report this to protect yourself. Some of the contact may come under the heading of sexual harassment and should be reported to the police.

Behaviours considered to be inappropriate, concerning or threatening may include:

- undue and unwanted attention, despite being asked to stop
- angry, aggressive or sexual communications (verbal or written)
- sexual harassment (unwelcome sexual conduct of any kind)
- stalking (repeated attempts to impose unwanted communication or contact)
- any act or threat of physical violence or property damage.

Inappropriate sexual behaviour

If you have concerns about anyone behaving towards you in an inappropriate sexualised and offensive manner, we recommend that you:

- contact your local police immediately to report any behaviour of a sexualised nature that is inappropriate
- contact your clinical supervisor for support if needed
- follow the guidance and links on our webpage
- don't open any attachments or images that are sent to you as they may be indecent images.

Note: The **2003 Communications Act** made it illegal to send images that are grossly offensive, of an indecent, obscene or menacing nature.

If you have any concerns or questions relating to this matter, please **book an appointment with a BACP Ethics Officer**.

Raising your concerns

To formally report your concerns or for specialist advice, call your local police on the non-emergency number 101.

If you feel you're in any immediate danger, do not hesitate to call 999.

Working as a counsellor or therapist can often expose you to intimate conversations about sex and sexuality.

However, if you feel you're the subject of uninhibited or poorly controlled behaviour, particularly of a sexual nature, you have the right to raise your concerns.

Inappropriate behaviour can include:

- comments and jokes of a personal or sexual nature
- inappropriate touching or grabbing
- sexual propositions (written or verbal)
- exposure of genitals or masturbation (face-to-face, online or over the phone).

Why you?

It can be important to your business to advertise your services online, through your own website, a directory or on social media. This means your contact details are available to the public.

As a counsellor or therapist, you may be contacted by someone who is seeking help or advice about a personal or sexual issue, and unfortunately, they may not always respect your personal or professional boundaries.

You may feel a sense of duty to help those who contact you for support, but it's important to recognise when the contact has gone beyond a level where you feel comfortable or safe.

Remember you haven't done anything wrong or encouraged this behaviour. You may be concerned with safeguarding the individual who has contacted you, but it's important for your own self-care to report the behaviour appropriately. This may include reporting to the police.

What you can do

For existing clients

For support and guidance on managing inappropriate contact from existing clients please see **Lone working guide – Part 3: Acting on a concern**.

For members of the public

Keep a record. This may help you remember incidents as they occur, so they're easier to recall if necessary at a later date:

- keep a diary of events – note the date, time, location and details of the cause for concern
- keep copies of letters, text messages and emails, or take screenshots of online messages sent on social media
- try to get evidence of any events that happen at your home or practice – take pictures where appropriate or record nuisance phone calls.

Seek support. You can:

- talk to your supervisor – they're there to help and support you and may have personal experience or professional advice
- if you're an employee – speak to your HR team for guidance and policies
- contact the **BACP Ethics team** – we can offer support and guidance, talk through the ethical implications of the issues you're experiencing and point you in the right direction.

Escalate your concerns. Contact your local police immediately for support if you feel harassed or in danger at any point. This may include (but is not limited to):

- verbal or physical threats
- unwanted physical or sexual advances, including sexually inappropriate images
- stalking (repeated attempts to impose unwanted communication or contact)
- any threat of physical violence, property damage, or production of a weapon.

To report your concerns or for specialist advice, call your local police on the non-emergency number 101.

If you feel you're in any immediate danger, do not hesitate to call 999.

Dealing with a bogus client

An individual may not be displaying inappropriate behaviour but may still be a cause for concern. Trust your instincts if something doesn't feel right.

If you're worried that someone is trying to gain your personal or bank details, see our **scams guidance** for further information.

Useful resources

A quick guide to lone working – A three-part guide on safe lone working, looking at location considerations, client considerations and acting on a concern.

A range of Ethics in Practice and Ethics Essentials resources are available from the BACP website: www.bacp.co.uk/eip www.bacp.co.uk/ee

From other organisations:

Suzy Lamplugh Trust – Live Life Safe

National Stalking Helpline

Action Fraud UK

Victim Support – dealing with stalking and harassment

Getting help for your client:

Samaritans

Supportline – confidential emotion support

Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) UK

Papyrus Hopeline UK (Prevention of Young Suicide)

CALM for young men (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

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