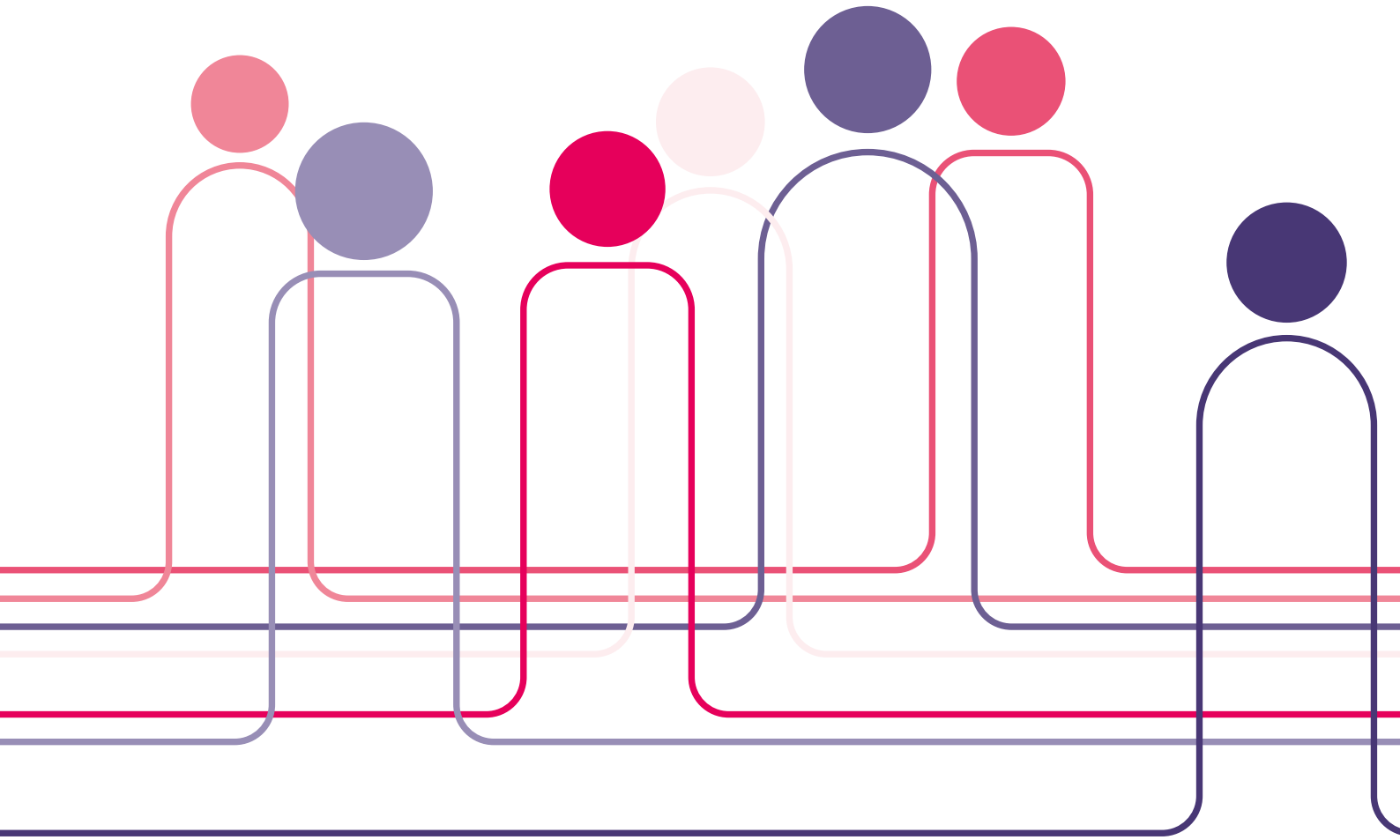
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A quick guide: Lone working Part 3



Checklist

Ethics Essentials

Acting on a concern

Introduction

In a recent survey of BACP members, 79% (n=694) said they work alone; 15% said they'd experienced violence or aggression while working with clients and or colleagues; this figure is significantly higher than the national average of 1.3% (BACP and Suzy Lamplugh Trust 2019).

The survey found that 92% of violent or aggressive incidents were carried out by clients or ex-clients and nearly 10% said it was perpetrated by a colleague or ex-colleague. In some cases, respondents experienced violence or aggression from clients and colleagues.

The types of incidents included verbal abuse, threats, sexual harassment and stalking. This highlights a potential risk for therapists when working alone. Forty-three percent of those affected said it had impacted their ability to do their job and had had a long-term effect on their confidence.

In the survey, 22% said they hadn't reported the incidents. Some of the reasons they gave included feeling unclear about the procedures and policies in place, what evidence they needed to report, and that they were anxious about breaking confidentiality.

Some were fearful of the therapeutic relationship breaking down and consequently ending work with the client. They were worried this could cause a loss of the relationship and loss of earnings.

How to use this resource

Members have a contractual commitment to work in line with the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions 2026*. This lone-working resource isn't contractually binding on members, but it's intended to give support by condensing relevant information and guidance into practical recommendations, which are valid at the time of publication. Recommendations given are in the context of the ethical principles and core responsibilities in the *Ethical Framework 2026*.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided. Specific issues that emerge from client work are often complex and we always recommend discussing practice dilemmas with a supervisor or consulting a qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner.

In this resource, we use the word 'therapist' to describe counsellors and psychotherapists, and 'therapy' to describe counselling and psychotherapy. We use the term 'practitioner' to include those who work in the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care.

What to do if you are experiencing stalking, harassment or abusive behaviours:

- trust your instincts. If the behaviour or contact feels uncomfortable, pay attention to it and seek help. If you feel you're at immediate risk call 999
- consult the National Stalking Helpline: www.suzylamplugh.org/Pages/Category/national-stalking-helpline, 0808 802 0300
- stalking is an official criminal offence (Protection from Harassment Act 1997 – amended by the Freedom Act 2012), so you can report the issue to the local police
- seek support – talk to trusted colleagues or your supervisor
- get advice from one of the stalking advice organisations – see below
- get emotional support from friends and family or seek professional mental health aid
- have a check-in and check-out contact agreement or 'buddy system' – arrange to contact a peer, friend or family member to let them know you have arrived safely and decide on a plan of action if you have not checked in with them. For more information download the Personal Safety leaflets from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust website: www.suzylamplugh.org/personal-safety-leaflets
- gather evidence – document what has been happening, a diary of incidents for example, keep all correspondence including texts, social media contact (screenshot if needed) emails, gifts, letters etc.
- complete a 'stalking risk checklist' available from www.paladinservice.co.uk
- clearly and assertively state your boundaries with the client, then don't engage with the stalker on future occasions.

Further advice

www.stalkinghelpline.org

0808 802 0300

www.suzylamplugh.org

www.actionagainststalking.org

www.scaredofsomeone.org

Ethical considerations

It won't be possible to think of every conceivable outcome in a therapeutic situation. By incorporating BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP, 2026) into our everyday thinking and reflection, you can prevent many difficult situations from arising. Situations that do arise need careful consideration.

As with any ethical dilemma, there may be a conflict between different ethical considerations, occasionally resulting in a potential risk to you. It's not always easy to determine the most appropriate course of action. You're invited through the *Ethical Framework* to act in the best interests and to do no harm to those using your services (EP BACP 2026) – is this always appropriate in situations involving our own safety? If you're not safe, you can't keep your client safe.

The examples below demonstrate some of the ethical complexities of lone working, particularly if there's a potential risk of stalking and harassment:

Our recent lone-working survey (BACP and Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2019) suggests that practitioners in private practice may be reluctant to act on concerning behaviour for fear of the therapy ending which, in turn, has financial implications. This may also result in a practitioner's reluctance to discuss the concerning behaviour in clinical supervision, as specified in Core Responsibility 4.3 of the *Ethical Framework* (BACP, 2026), and possibly lead to professional isolation, which could ultimately impact practitioner self-care.

The ethical principles of do no harm and to act in the best interests of those using our services, along with those of confidentiality and collaboration, may be compromised or in conflict should a client demonstrate concerning behaviour that requires the therapist to contact the police or stalking organisations to seek advice or report behaviour.

In these cases, supervision or organisational management should be consulted before breaking confidentiality.

However, if the situation is an emergency, safety is paramount and therefore call 999. Our Legal Resource 014 resource *Managing confidentiality within the counselling professions* might also be useful.

Therapists faced with dilemmas regarding confidentiality need to think through what is to be disclosed, who requires the information, why disclosure is necessary at this time, to whom the information should be given, and the most appropriate method of disclosure, all within the context of current data protection regulations. The *Ethical Framework 2026* offers an ethical decision-making rationale, and this can be used alongside the ethical decision-making tool on the BACP website to help you work through the conflicting areas of the dilemma. It offers an ethical decision-making model that can be used to support good practice for any dilemma faced by any therapists irrespective of working alone. By making use of this kind of model, situations can be regularly reviewed and decisions or actions amended as necessary.

Practitioner competency levels in working with these clients must be addressed. If the client discloses an issue regarding their risk that you feel is beyond your competency level, it's important to seek advice from your supervisor and then our ethics helpline is available if you need further support. This is particularly important if you're in training, a novice, or a more experienced practitioner who needs extra professional development in this area of work.

It's vital that awareness of lone-working issues and how to assess and manage clients who could pose a risk are addressed in order to be as safe as possible in the work.

Things to consider to keep you and your clients safe:

- clear and firm contracting, maintaining boundaries
- privacy and confidentiality
- reflection in and beyond supervision
- working within competencies
- building a relationship of shared trust and respect
- having regular reviews
- being accountable for our decisions and actions
- awareness around those identities more susceptible to hate crime. Knowing this upfront can help us assess our level of risk when working alone.

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