

Working With Suicidal Risk

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What about suicide?



Suicide is an autonomous decision

- The Suicide Act (1961) - unless informed consent could be impeded by the presence of a diagnosable mental illness, taking one's life is viewed as a legal and autonomous decision. In Scotland, suicide has never been illegal.
- The very nature of the therapeutic relationship respects and promotes client autonomy.

Source: The Suicide Act (1961)

My initial reaction was...

“what are my views or feelings regarding suicide?”

Influential Factors

External influences

- Suicide is wrong
- Suicide is attention seeking
- Suicide is a sign of weakness
- Only the clinically depressed attempt suicide

Personal misconceptions

- Talking about suicide will promote the idea of suicide
- If I work with suicidal clients it will be my responsibility to ensure they continue to live
- It is my responsibility to change their minds
- If I fail... I will be punished

The benefits of preparation

- CPD
- Reflect, reflect, reflect
- Supervision
- Learn from others who have experience working with suicide

The BACP Ethical Framework

- Offers invaluable guidance
- When working with suicidal risk I often revisit the Values and Principles of the framework
- “Ethical decisions that are strongly supported by one or more of these principles without any contradiction with the others may be regarded as well-founded.” (BACP, 2018)

Source: BACP, (2018) Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions

The benefits of clear contracting

- Contracting allows us to define the boundaries of the relationship
- Making the client aware of confidentiality and any limitations can make the process of assessing and managing risk a less daunting experience for client and counsellor

Note Taking

- In normal circumstances I tend to keep clear and concise session notes
- When working with risk I prefer to make notes in more depth and detail
- This allows me to keep an accurate record of the nature of the disclosure, risk, interventions and decisions made in collaboration with my client
- I often offer my clients the option of viewing my notes regarding any assessed risk

When suicide is the presenting concern

When client's disclose suicidal feelings or intent during the course of therapy

What if I act too soon... or too late?

The following checklist may be a useful starting point:

- What does the client want you to do with this information?
- What does the law say you should do?
- What does our ethical guidelines tell us to do?
- What is the organisation's policy or procedure in this situation? (Amis, 2017, p124)

Source: Amis, K. (2017) Boundaries, Power and Ethical Responsibility in Counselling and Psychotherapy

“I’ve got a bad feeling”

The benefits of and barriers to exploring perceived risk

“I should have done more”

Losing a client to suicide

Working with suicide

The need for support and effective self-care