

# Risk, Anxiety and Good Practice

Ethical responsibilities and positive risk taking

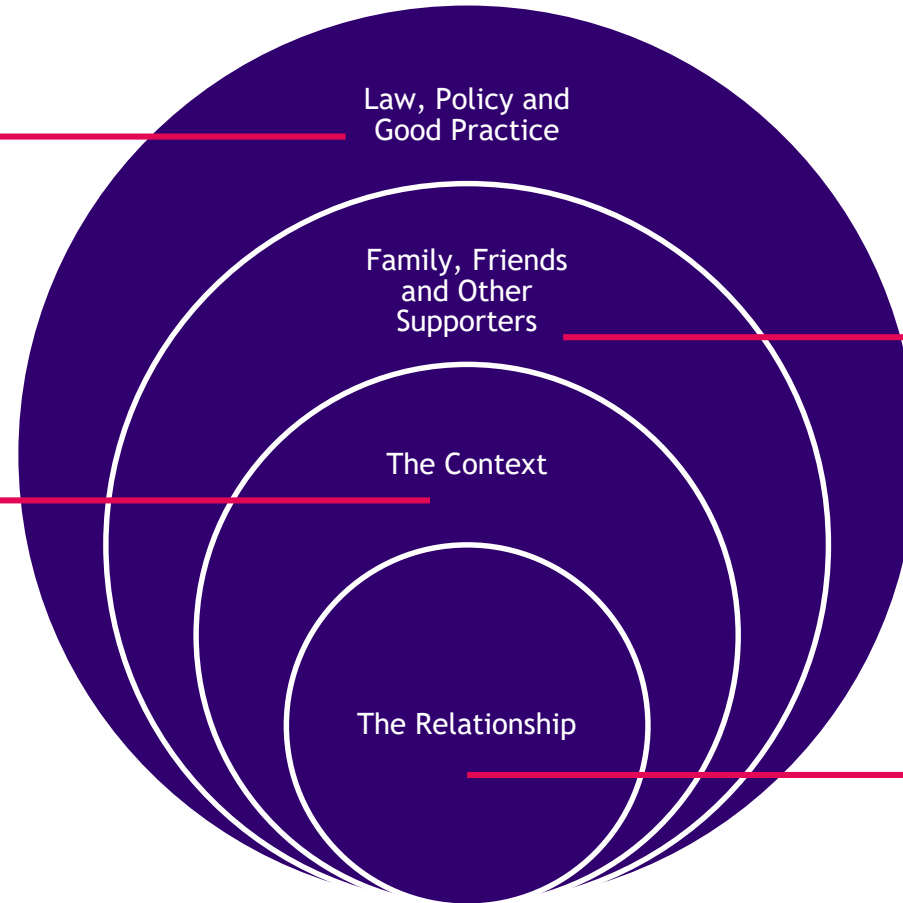
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# Counselling and its Systems

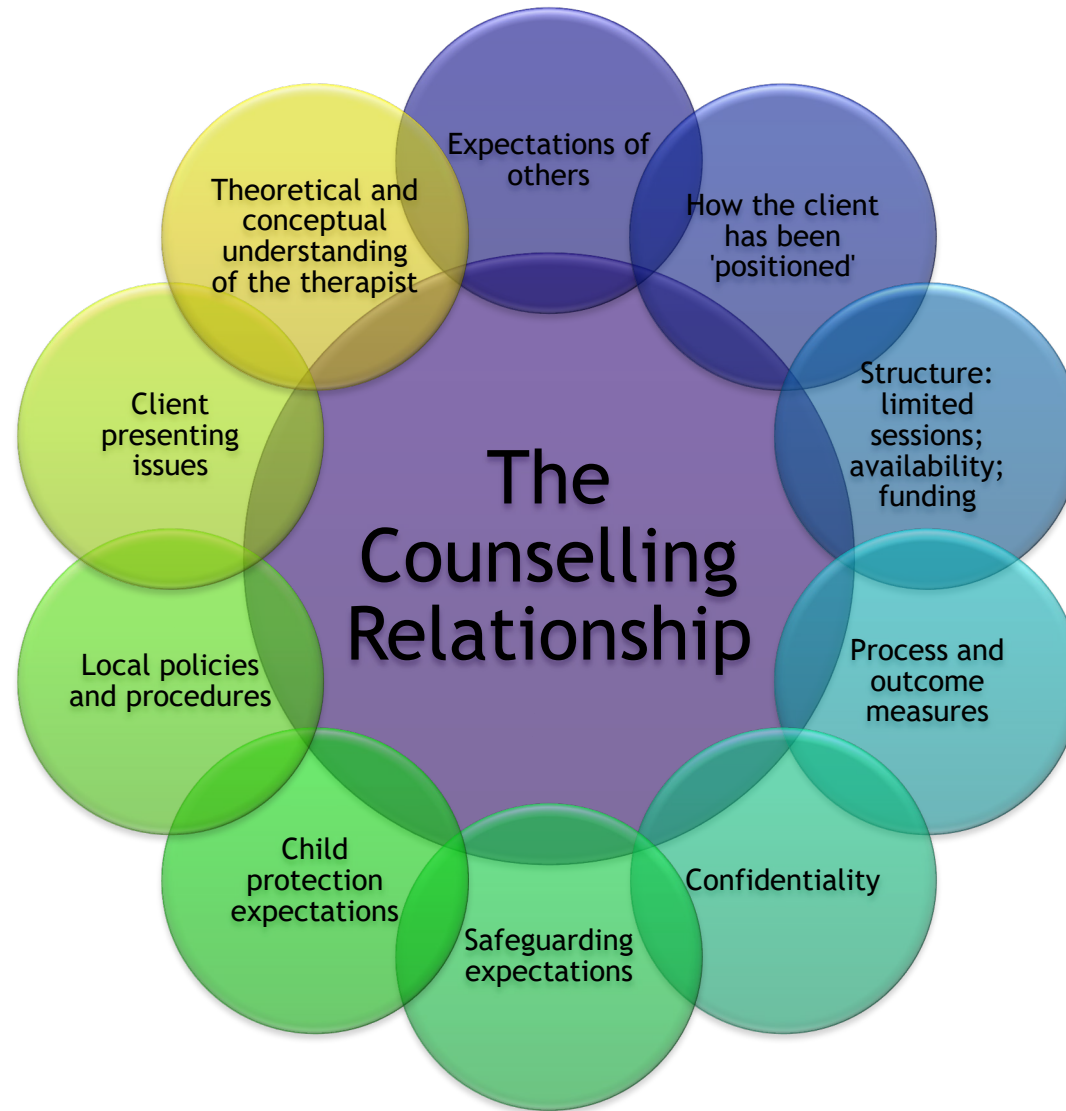
National picture  
and developing  
'expectations'

School, college  
or other young  
people's setting -  
local policies and  
processes



Key individuals  
and experiences  
that shape more  
than 50 minutes  
per week

Young person,  
counsellor and  
the therapeutic  
exchange



# Safeguarding

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility: for services to be effective each professional and organisation should play their full part

# Safeguarding

**A child-centred approach: for services to be effective they should be based on a clear understanding of the needs and views of children**

# Safeguarding as a Specific Factor



# Working with Risk



We often approach risk from a 'binary' position, i.e., risk is either present, or it isn't



In actual fact there are aspects of risks in all our lives, all of the time: what we do is use information, and our own personal perspective, to navigate them



Some situations are, comparatively, neutral to us - others, such as suicide, often evoke stronger responses where our ethical position is clearer to us

Reeves, A. (2015). *Working with risk in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage

# So how might we define risk...

- Exposure to the possibility of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance; a chance or situation involving such a possibility
- To act in such a way as to bring about the possibility of an unpleasant or unwelcome event, or
- To take a risk, be bold or daring

Oxford English Dictionary, 2018



# And what does that definition mean...



RISK IS ABOUT BEING EXPOSED TO DANGER OR UNCERTAINTY, OR THE POSSIBILITY OF THIS



THE POSSIBILITY OF RISK CAN BE BROUGHT ABOUT BY OUR ACTIONS



RISK IS NOT ALWAYS ABOUT DANGER, BUT CAN BE ASSOCIATED WITH BEING BOLD OR DARING

# So, what do we specifically mean by 'risk'...

## Five different types of risk in the helping relationship:

- Situational
- Relational
- Contextual
- Professional
- Personal



# So what are situational risks...

They relate to events or situations, or their potential, and in the context of a helping relationship relate to specific situations. For example:

- Potential for client suicide
- Self-injury and self-harm
- Safeguarding concerns
- Child protection
- Risk of violence to others
- Terrorist threat

Reeves, A. (2015). *Working with risk in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage

# And what about relational risks...

In the helping context, such risks are embedded typically in the dynamic between the helper, and the person being helped. For example:

- Sexual attraction
- Financial mismanagement or inappropriate interaction
- Unacknowledged or mismanaged transference issue
- Unacknowledged or mismanaged countertransference issue
- Actions that might deplete the client's autonomy or wellbeing

Reeves, A. (2015). *Working with risk in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage

# And then there's contextual risks...

Such risks relate to the context in which the helping relationship is delivered. For example:

- An inconsistent or inequitable delivery of service
- Lack of clear ethical position in relation to the help being offered
- Inconsistent expectations of the helper in a working setting
- Poor working practices, or procedures
- Established relationship inconsistent with the ethos of helping

Reeves, A. (2015). *Working with risk in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage

# So what are professional risks...

Actions that might undermine our integrity in our helping role.

For example:

- Being accused of an action that might lead to a criminal conviction
- Acting in a way that undermines a helpee's confidence in the act of helping itself, e.g., criticising the help offered within a context to the person being helped
- Paying insufficient care and attention to the helping relationship and acting in a way that undermines it, e.g., working when exhausted, or under the influence of alcohol/drugs
- General actions in the public domain that lead to a negative association

Reeves, A. (2015). *Working with risk in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage

# Finally, what are personal risks...

Risks that relate directly to the wellbeing of the helper. For example:

- Vicarious trauma
- Burnout
- Relationship or family difficulties
- Bringing personal matters into the helping relationship
- Inappropriate self-disclosure
- Meeting own needs in the helping relationship at the expense of the client

Reeves, A. (2015). *Working with risk in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage

# Then There is ‘Process Anxiety’

## Therapist Anxiety

- Missing something
- Getting it wrong
- Being blamed
- Failure to protect
- Reputational damage
- Loss of support options for client
- Loss of service

## Institutional Anxiety

- Missing something
- Getting it wrong
- Being blamed
- Failure to protect
- Reputational damage
- Loss of support options for client
- Loss of service



# Jake: Practice in Action



# Jake



Jake is 15 years of age

He has come to see you as the school counsellor following a physical assault some months ago, presenting with trauma symptoms

He is drinking heavily and has begun to self-injure

He has intermittent suicidal ideation, which can impulsively move into suicidal intent (though has not acted on these thoughts)

You have been meeting with him for several weeks and he has engaged well

He mentions, in passing that, when he was 7 a family friend 'touched' him sexually

# Jake



You ask him for more details

His family has not had contact with this person for several years

He refuses to give you this person's name

You ask permission to inform the safeguarding lead of these concerns, explaining why

He refuses. He says that while he is very unhappy about what has happened, he would only be able to tell someone "when the time was right"

He become very distressed about the possibility of his confidentiality being broken and says he would not be able to live with this

# Jake: Managing Historical Abuse

## To break confidentiality

- Ensures Jake's disclosure is taken seriously
- Creates an opportunity for exploration and further disclosure
- Meet safeguarding concerns with respect to Jake's wellbeing
- Acknowledges historical or ongoing risk in relation to others

## To maintain confidentiality

- Respects Jake's autonomy and his capacity to make informed decisions
- Respects his use of counselling and provides an opportunity for future disclosure he is in charge of
- Limits potential fractures in the relationship
- Responds to increased suicide risk

# What will you do?



# Managing a Balance



# Safeguarding

**A child-centred approach: for services to be effective they should be based on a clear understanding of the needs and views of children**

# Jake : his needs

To be protected

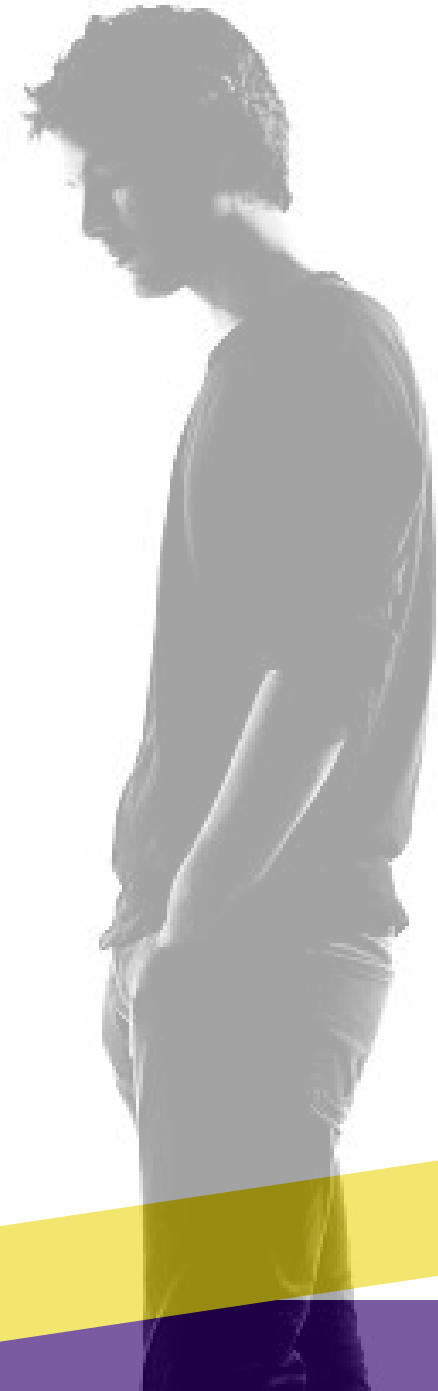
To be safe

To be taken seriously

To be believed

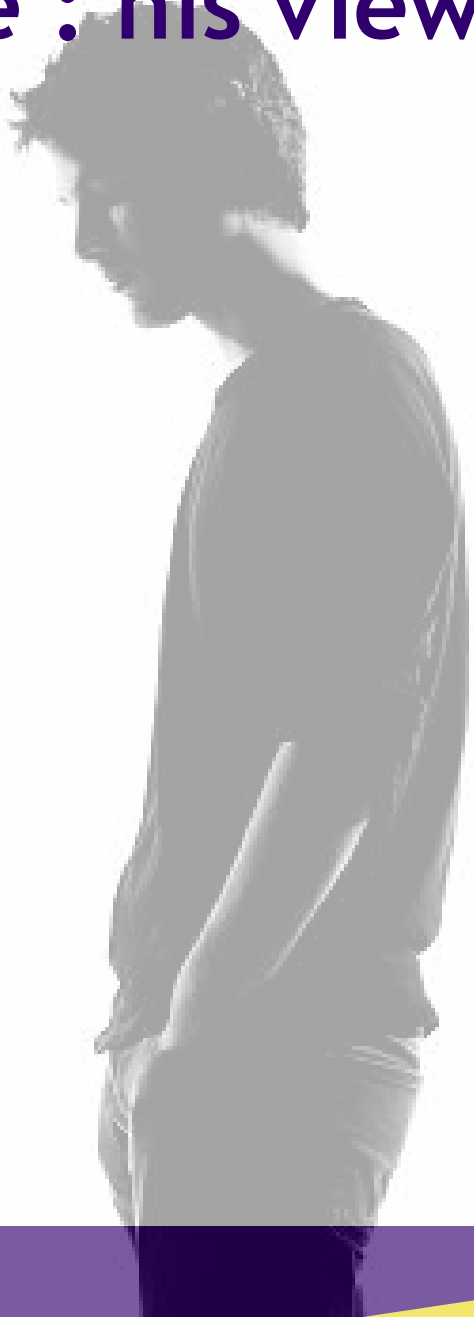
To be responded to

To be safeguarded





# Jake : his views



**Wants to be in control**  
**Wants to manage the timing of interventions**  
**Wants to cope**  
**Wants to be heard**  
**Wants to trust his counsellor**

So, what do we do?



# Navigating the Terrain

# Good Practice Parameters

Clear, written agreements with the organisation about expectations

Clear, written agreements with the young person communicating those expectations

Clarity about contact with families

Mutual agreements in place with supervisor

Reflexive position with respect to risk and management of boundaries

Understanding ethical expectations in the context of work

Drawing on guidance from other agencies and settings, e.g., BACP: CYPF

Willingness to communicate with, and challenge, professional organisations to ensure guidance remains current

Write about practice and disseminate ideas (respecting confidentiality, obviously)

# Clear, written agreements with the organisation

- What do you expect of the organisation
- What does the organisation expect of you
- What does the organisation understand of safeguarding in their context
- What is the culture of the organisation about positive risk-taking
- Who can be contacted, when, and how
- Ensure organisation is aware of ethical requirements for practice

# But, what is positive risk-taking...

Positive risk-taking is an important aspect of any helping relationship. Otherwise, the danger is that all helping relationships could become limited by the possibility of risk

Risk therefore, is not a binary concept (there is risk, there is no risk)

Therefore, positive risk-taking is about:

acknowledging risk

putting in measures to mitigate the risk

review risk regularly in the context of holding confidentiality

# Clear, written agreements with the client

Critical the young person knows, and understands, what the boundaries of the relationship are

These need to be communicating in a way, and at a time, that maximises the young person's understanding and engagement

Need to be consistent with organisational expectations

Need to be acted on as, when and if required (do we know what 'required' means?)

# Mutual agreements with supervisor

Is the supervisor aware of your organisation's expectations

Does the supervisor understand the counsellor's own understanding and position

Does the counsellor understand the supervisor's understanding and position

Are all these points enshrined in a clear supervisory contract

Does the counsellors know how to contact the supervisor, when they are available, and how to bridge the advice back into the setting



# Clarity about contact with families

Wherever possible and appropriate, families need to be linked in with the counselling

Clear parameters need to be agreed with the young people with respect to confidentiality

The experience of the family - both positive and challenging - is critical information and should not be diminished in its importance

Families should be seen as a resource, not an inconvenience

Systemic thinking should sit at the heart of all good therapeutic work

# Reflexive position in relation to risk

Does the counsellor fully understand what is meant by 'risk' in the context

How does the counsellor conceptualise **positive risk-taking**

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How does the counsellor ensure they retain a fully reflexive position

How does the counsellors self-support when organisational and personal perspectives clash

# Understanding ethical expectations

What does the professional organisation say about ethics

What do they say about work with children and young people

How is a level of ethical engagement in practice retained, rather than a 'binary' position in relation to ethics

What does ethics mean in the particular working context

Does the organisation understand ethical and practice requirements and have these been successfully negotiated

# Drawing on guidance from others

What do other counsellors in the area do

Are their forums or meeting opportunities to share and discuss practice considerations

How can learning be transferred successfully into the working context, in a way that involves all parties

Are there specialist divisions or groups to help inform practice, e.g., BACP: CYPF Division

What is the wider guidance from your professional organisation

# Willingness to communicate with, and challenge

How is a clear dialogue maintained with key staff in the institution

How is a clear dialogue maintained with key others, e.g., family (while respecting the young person's confidentiality)

Professional organisations are keen to remain relevant to practice, but can drift away from that position if not communicating fully with the members

Contribute to consultation mechanisms and write guidance information for others

Share good ideas, and difficult times

# Write about practice and share ideas

Make contributions to professional journals and magazines

Hold reflective practice sessions to connect with others - including multi-disciplinary forums (avoiding introspective, self-fulfilling thinking)

Involve young people in the development of services

Use social media to communicate good practice principles (being mindful of the dangers of social media too)

Consider **Alliance and Advocacy** as possible key aspects of work - this helps position counselling as a social justice activity