



# Ethical Problem-Solving

Ethical dilemmas in counselling and psychotherapy can arise in a myriad of situations. The nature of therapeutic relationships and the diverse issues that clients bring to sessions make the realm of mental health a fertile ground for ethical challenges. Some common ethical dilemmas faced by counsellors and psychotherapists include:

- Risk of harm to self or others – clients expressing intentions to harm themselves or others can put therapists in a challenging position.
- Illegal activity – when clients disclose situations of illegal activity, therapists may face ethical and legal mandates to report, even if it might impact the therapeutic relationship.
- Inability to make psychological contact – for example, if a client presents for a session under the influence of medication, street drugs or alcohol, they may be unable to make psychological contact.
- Substance abuse – an additional ethical dilemma may occur when a client who is under the influence of substances states an intention to drive home. Allowing them to do so would have implications for public safety.
- Mutual acquaintances – if a client discloses that they know someone who the therapist also knows (either personally as a friend or relative, or professionally, e.g. your supervisor), this may also trigger an ethical dilemma.
- Dual relationships – for example, a client might be about to become a work colleague, leading to potential boundary issues.

Tim Bond (2000, pp. 223–236) describes a six-step process for dealing with ethical dilemmas. This is intended to stimulate the consideration of a wide range of possibilities before making a decision concerning an ethical dilemma.

The six steps in Bond's ethical problem-solving process are as follows:

**1. Produce a brief description of the problem or dilemma.**

**2. Whose dilemma is it anyway?**

Your choices here will be between:

- client
- counsellor
- client and counsellor.

**3. Consider all available ethical principles and guidelines.**

- What codes of standards are available to you?
- What, if anything, does the law dictate?
- What actions are prohibited?
- What actions are required?
- What are the people involved entitled by law?

In the absence of direction, consider:

- beneficence (doing the right thing)
- non-maleficence (doing no harm)
- justice (doing the right thing)
- respect for autonomy (respecting the client).

**4. Identify all possible courses of action.**

**5. Select the best course of action.**

Test your selected course of action against:

- universality (would others take this course of action?)
- publicity (What would your peers and the papers say?)
- justice (have you done the right thing?).

**6. Evaluate the outcome.**

- Was the outcome what you had hoped?
- Have you considered all the relevant factors?
- Would you do the same again?

**Reference**

Bond, T. (2000). Standards and Ethics in Counselling. London: Sage.