



# POWER IN THE COUNSELLING RELATIONSHIP

Like electricity, power is a benign force. Power can be a source for good or evil, depending on the person wielding it.

As therapists, we may all come to a situation where we have power over something or someone. It is wisdom and justice, which guides us in its use, which is why we refer to an ethical framework and have supervision to aid our decision making.

## Why retain power?

Counsellors and psychotherapists should not work outside the law or ethical guidelines.

Let's look at two examples of how power can be used positively.

1. Client A attends the session and says to the counsellor she is going to kill her husband, citing both the means and a plan.
2. Client B has had three sessions, in which time the counsellor realises that his skill set does not meet the client's need.

In both these cases, the therapist ethically has to make a decision—in the case of client 'A', whether to break confidentiality, and in the case of client 'B', whether a referral should be made.

The decision-making process in both these cases means that the therapist has to exercise power—in the first instance, to protect the third party, and in the second, to make sure the client receives the best possible service and care.

Power can also be useful for keeping boundaries and managing self-care—for example, politely declining a client’s request to have your home phone number so they can call you at any time of the day or night.

## Check and Balance

One of the ways that therapists can address the power imbalance is through the counselling contract. A well-written contract covering the limits of confidentiality, data protection, fees and any other relevant information allows the client to make an informed choice, which goes a long way to reducing the power imbalance.