

Confidentiality Policy

LIFE-FORCE provides a Counselling Service for a wide range of clients and adheres to the BACP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions. The Organisation believes that confidentiality is the basis of the development of the counselling relationship, and therefore all those who use our services need to be absolutely certain about our commitment to working within confidential guidelines at all times.

Confidentiality is therefore considered to be extremely important within the various work settings of the Organisation. This confidentiality policy is therefore applicable to all staff members of LIFE-FORCE including counsellor team members, counselling tutors, trainee counsellors on placement, office and administration staff, maintenance and domestic staff. This policy aims to encourage high levels of professional practice standards at all times.

What is Confidentiality?

The Dictionary defines the words:

- 'Confide' – *'to hand over to the charge of, to entrust to, to tell a secret, to put faith in, to rely on...'*
- 'Confidant' – *'a person to whom one can tell one's private affairs...'*

BACP's Ethical Principles of Counselling and Psychotherapy defines and describes the first principle as follows:

'Fidelity: Honouring the trust placed in the practitioner - Being trustworthy is regarded as fundamental to understanding and resolving ethical issues. Practitioners who adopt this principle: act in accordance with the trust placed in them; regard confidentiality as an obligation arising from the client's trust; restrict any disclosure of confidential information about clients to furthering the purposes for which it was originally disclosed.'

LIFE-FORCE thus aims to embody these principles by offering a confidential environment to all service users. This applies to all information which is shared within contractual professional boundaries such as therapy sessions, supervision sessions, training sessions, plus client referral details within the office etc., which must be treated as strictly confidential, unless the staff member has the explicit verbal and/or written permission of the client/student to act otherwise. The organisation does however acknowledge that the limits of confidentiality may vary and will be determined by the contracted agreement between client/student and the therapist/supervisor/tutor, as applicable.

Breaking Confidentiality

Certain situations exist where the counsellor may need to break confidentiality either with or without the client's/student's prior consent. These exceptional circumstances are as follows:

- When the organisation staff member believes there is a serious concern or risk of harm regarding the physical, mental or emotional health or well-being to self or others. In rare circumstances such as these, action might need to be taken without the client's prior consent, however whenever possible the client would be informed in advance of any planned intended course of action or disclosure. Such a decision would only be made after careful consideration and discussion with the Director, after consultation with supervisor if applicable.
(Ref. Team Counsellor Handbook: Adult Disclosure Policy)
- When the client is a young person under the age of 18 years old who is not considered to be 'Gillick Competent', and where the circumstances indicate possible child neglect or abuse, then the counsellor may be best advised not to seek the clients consent.
(Ref. Team Counsellor Handbook: Child Protection and Disclosure Policy)
- When the client has committed a criminal act and/or acts of terrorism and discloses this information to their counsellor. In such circumstances the counsellor must inform the police without seeking the client's prior consent.

General Principles & Ethos

Occasionally a member of staff may become aware that someone known to them is attending counselling at the Centre for example a relative, friend, neighbour etc. In such circumstances they should maintain absolute discretion and if considered necessary bring this matter to the attention of the Director in order to agree the best appropriate course of action that might need to be taken.

Generally information of a confidential nature should only be shared on a strictly need to know basis. In other words there should not be any discussions about individuals who are using the services, unless done with purposeful intention. This means there would need to be an area of practice management or professional concern that required discussion with regard to a client, student or the staff member themselves. Similarly there must not be any discussion about clients or client case work within earshot of other staff members, service users or with anyone outside of the Organisation. All staff need to be aware that any breaches of confidentiality could result in internal disciplinary proceedings or external civil action proceedings resulting in legal damages.

Confidential Organisational Information

All staff need to be aware that, where applicable, all correspondence, including client case notes and emails can be subpoenaed and are therefore discoverable in the course of legal proceedings. It is important that sensitive matters which could be construed as being relevant to any potential proceedings, should not be communicated without due consideration.

Some staff members may have access to and be entrusted with organisational documents, policies, procedures, management information, staff changes, complaints and future business plans of LIFE-FORCE, all of which is 'Confidential Organisational Information'. With this in mind all staff are required to adhere to the following:

- a) Not at any time, whether during or after their work with LIFE-FORCE to disclose to any person or make use of any such Confidential Organisational Information, (unless specifically authorised by LIFE-FORCE, or as a necessary part of their work duties or as required to do so by law).
- b) Prior to the end of working at LIFE-FORCE, to return to the office, all original or copy documents belonging to LIFE-FORCE which are in the staff member's possession, including the Team Counsellor Handbook and the Staff Handbook.
- c) Not at any time to copy or to make an abstract, summary or précis of the whole or part of a document belonging to LIFE-FORCE except when required to do so for the work, in which event the copies will belong to LIFE-FORCE.
- d) To treat all client referral forms, closure forms, feedback forms and case notes in a confidential manner and to destroy by confidential means, such as shredding, all confidential records after the required legal time period, which is normally 6 years for business documents and 7 years for client case notes.
- e) To treat all computer programmes, documents, tapes, data, discs, hard copies and client information in a strictly confidential manner.