

Ethical Dilemmas

These dilemmas cover a range of ethical difficulties, including the management of confidentiality, third-party information, child protection, competency, self-disclosure, the management of therapy when offered at home, and the setting of boundaries. When we think of these issues in isolation we can, perhaps, be afforded some degree of certainty and confidence in our position. For example, it might be right to break confidentiality when we are concerned about the safety of a child, or that we would stop or suspend our practice if we felt unable to work safely because of our own distress, or that we would manage boundaries clearly and unambiguously and never transgress them. Yet the dilemmas above speak of the profound difficulties we can face when thinking of our responsibilities and potential actions in real-life situations, especially difficult situations we might inadvertently find ourselves in. Consider the following scenarios, presented initially in the *Ethical Dilemmas* column in *Therapy Today*.

DILEMMA ONE

Matthew works as a counsellor in a large organisation. He has been seeing a member of staff due to work-related stress for some time. He receives an anonymous letter about his client, which states that it is important he knows the client has 'mental health problems'. It then goes on to detail things the client has allegedly said or done in the workplace. The client does not know this letter has been sent and Matthew does not wish to cause the client further distress by declaring it, given that it is anonymous.

DILEMMA TWO

Khalil is a counsellor who works for a specialist agency supporting adult survivors of sexual abuse. His client, Angie, discloses abuse perpetrated by a family friend when she was eight years old. She has recently discovered that the alleged abuser has moved in with her aunt, who has a child – a boy aged 11. Angie has never disclosed her abuse to her family and does not wish to do so now. The agency policy is to provide total confidentiality to clients, apart from when legally obliged not to do so. Angie minimises any current risk and states that she only told Khalil because of the agency policy to protect her confidentiality.

DILEMMA THREE

Suzanne has worked in a primary care counselling agency for four years and has become good friends with a colleague there, Michelle. Michelle is a highly respected and liked member of the team. Suzanne discovered recently that Michelle has been drinking heavily, and for some time. While she appears to be sober at work, Suzanne is fearful for Michelle's clients and her capacity to work professionally. Michelle became distressed when asked about this, and begged Suzanne not to say anything to her manager – she would 'lose [her] job and become unemployable'. Suzanne feels torn between trying to support her friend to turn things around personally, and the wellbeing of her clients, which increasingly seems to be compromised.

DILEMMA FOUR

During supervision your new supervisee informs you that he is unable to attend the next session as he is a member of the British National Party (BNP) and is attending their next conference. You have not had any concerns previously regarding his suitability as a trainee counsellor. However, on researching BNP's policies and constitution you find that the BNP are implacably opposed to multiculturalism, Islam and anti-discrimination laws. Could this be in direct conflict with BACP's own Ethical Framework and the policies of the trainee's education provider? If so, what actions need to be considered, if any?

DILEMMA FIVE

You work as an independent practitioner in your own home seeing clients for counselling. You have been seeing Joy for three months. She initially made contact with you on the recommendation of an infertility support group she was attending. She and her partner had been trying for children but have been told that in all likelihood this is not going to be successful. The counselling appeared to be progressing well and Joy was beginning the difficult process of talking about her grief. The last time you met with Joy she was angry and distressed. She had noticed a photograph of you and your children on the wall. She felt that this was an inappropriate self-disclosure and did not feel able to talk to you anymore. She walked out of the session half-way through.

DILEMMA SIX

Emma is a qualified counsellor. Recently she received messages from a client via her Facebook account. Emma assumed her account was private and wasn't aware that clients would be able to contact her via this forum. Her client, Sam, sent messages to her privately and made comments about her profile picture. Although Emma and Sam contracted clear boundaries at the start of the working relationship this is an area that wasn't discussed. Emma is unsure how to deal with this issue as she is still working with Sam and is due to see him this week.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

- 1 Should Matthew tell his client about the letter he has received?
- 2 Should Khalil pass on her concerns about child protection?
- 3 Should Michelle talk to her manager about Suzanne's problems?
- 4 As the supervisor, how would you respond to your supervisee's statements?
- 5 How would you respond following Joy's leaving the counselling distressed?
- 6 What should Emma say to Sam, if anything, about her Facebook page?
- 7 Overall, which aspects of the Ethical Framework might inform your responses to the questions above?