



**UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES
FOR PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS**

PROPOSED BY

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR COUNSELLING

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The International Association for Counselling (IAC) is an International Non-Governmental Association (NGO) with United Nations consultative status. Since 1966, we have worked to advance the development of counselling through practice, education, research, and advocacy initiatives. IAC advances the development of counselling in order to improve people's lives and well-being.

- **Our Vision:** A world where counselling is available to all.
- **Our Mission:** To develop the counselling profession worldwide through practice, education, research, advocacy, and policy initiatives.
- **Definition of Professional Counselling:** A method of relating and responding to others with the aim of providing them with opportunities to explore clarify and work towards living in a more satisfactory and resourceful way. Where counselling is primarily nondirective and non-advisory, some situations require positive guidance by means of information and service.
- **Definition of a Professional Counsellor:** A professional counsellor is one who engages in practices appropriate for the context in which they work, where professional preparation and development involves a form of advanced counsellor education or training, supervised counsellor experiences, a commitment to professional standards, and a commitment to continuing education in the field. While some settings have assessment-based credentialing and licensing for counsellors, other settings have yet to formalize processes for professional counsellors and may require further research and advocacy to establish professional representation.

Professional counselling changes lives for the better and reduces suffering. IAC's humanitarian mission advocates for more access to professional counselling worldwide. IAC advocacy influences governments and intergovernmental organisations to increase recognition of counselling as a profession. In some countries, there are no professional counsellors and no system of governmental recognition or regulation of counselling as a profession. IAC helps to

establish counselling structures (e.g. national associations or education programmes) in those countries. Technology is more closely connecting the global circle of counselors. We embrace the modernisation of our profession and proudly serve to advance culturally relevant counselling practice, research, education and policy worldwide.

IAC is working to advance the counselling profession worldwide and we invite you to join us in our mission. For further information on IAC, please see our [website](#).

PREAMBLE

The rapid expansion of the counselling profession around the world can be attributed to a number of factors, including the economic, social, and political changes in traditional modes that have resulted in many people losing access to needed support. In the past 50 years, a significant body of research has emerged that provides evidence that professional counselling services can assist individuals, groups, and communities in addressing a range of educational, vocational/career, personal, family, and social issues. Professional counsellors offer services centred on the cultural context of the individual receiving the service, irrespective of their age, colour, ethnicity, disability or illness, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, politics, language, race, religious or spiritual beliefs, legal, economic or social status.

Codes of ethics that reflect sound guiding principles are foundational to the integrity and credibility of every profession. It is the intention of the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Professional Counsellors to provide a framework that reflects shared human values. As such, the principles are general rather than specific and aspirational rather than prescriptive. We recognize that the use of these principles to guide codes of conduct and practice will differ across different regions of the world in order to align with local customs, laws, values, and beliefs.

The International Association for Counselling has developed six categories of ethical principles to guide the work of professional counsellors:

- 1. Embracing the value of all peoples**
- 2. Respecting culture and diversity**
- 3. Upholding foundational practices and competency**
- 4. Valuing advocacy**

5. **Promoting health and wellness**
6. **Implementing ethical practices in professional counselling**

IAC Categories of Ethical Principles

1) Embracing the value of all peoples

Professional counsellors create a context of personal safety for those they are helping. Through their counselling interactions they demonstrate genuine respect and acceptance of the perspectives of all individuals regardless of life circumstances, recognizing their agency, thoughts, feelings, and biases. *Embracing the value of all peoples occurs when professional counsellors:*

- a) Seek to provide and encourage environments that support the personal fulfillment and well-being of individuals, groups, or communities.
- b) Advocate for environments that allow safety from harm for all peoples.
- c) Value the worth of individuals regardless of criminal or legal charges they may have faced in the past or present.
- d) Offer unconditional positive regard for all individuals regardless of whether they agree with their values, beliefs, or behaviors; the only exceptions would be where positive regard could result in serious harm to that person or to others.

2) Respecting culture and diversity

Professional counsellors endeavor to recognize their own cultural and personal perspectives and biases. They offer services that demonstrate a foundational value of diversity within the context of inclusion for everyone. *Respecting culture and diversity occurs when professional counsellors:*

- a) Value diversity and inclusion in offering services to individuals, groups, families, and communities from any background, belief system, or identities.
- b) Support and value the personal and/or collective identities of all people.
- c) Support and value the freedom for people to engage in self-expression of their own needs and beliefs as they relate to personal practices, cultural identities, responsibilities, or duties, while not interfering with other people's freedoms.
- d) Provide the same high quality of services to all individuals within the communities they serve, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other aspects of their identity, and respect their freedom of thought and expression related to the practices they observe.

- e) Support the freedom of opinion for all individuals regardless of whether the professional counsellor is in agreement and foster personal growth without coercion.
- f) Strive to increase people's abilities to participate in, benefit from, and celebrate the resources in their community that contribute to greater connectedness and cultural identity.

3) Upholding foundational practices and competency

Professional counsellors recognize the importance of professional values and behaviors.

Exercising foundational practices in professional counselling requires counsellors to strive for excellence, competence, and self-awareness in every interaction with clients. They take great care with how clients and their privacy are treated and comply with necessary requirements to provide professional counselling services within the contexts they practice. *Upholding foundational practices and competency occurs when professional counsellors:*

- a) Guard against personal assumptions, values, and biases that denigrate the worth of any individuals or groups.
- b) Respect the privacy of their clients and the confidentiality of the client-counsellor relationship.
- c) Exercise practices, policies, and standards that demonstrate overall beneficence with all they may serve and reject approaches that result in any form of maleficence.
- d) Exhibit veracity by being honest and truthful when working within client systems.
- e) Protect privacy by keeping only information that is needed to support the ongoing care of the people they serve.
- f) Exercise confidentiality and security of all personal information unless compelled to otherwise for the safety of the client or others, or due to legal obligations within the context of practice.
- g) Utilize all technology, including telehealth platforms, that will enhance the access and support of the client experience in counselling, while safeguarding informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and security.

4) Valuing advocacy

Professional counsellors are keenly aware that basic human rights are crucial to the mental health and wellness of all people, and are aware of systemic biases that can result in marginalization for individuals, families, and groups. They advocate with institutions and policy

makers for equal rights and access to opportunities. *Valuing advocacy occurs when professional counsellors:*

- a) Advocate for and support the autonomy of individuals, families, and groups and work to resolve any conflict arising from differences between competing autonomies.
- b) Serve as advocates at the individual, institutional, and/or societal level to foster socio-cultural and political change to meet the needs of individuals, groups, and the community as a whole.
- c) Advocate for and engage in fair and impartial treatment for those who are charged with offenses.
- d) Work to advocate for the mental health needs of any individuals seeking safety from personal, legal, political, religious, or other forms of persecution.
- e) Advocate for fairness and legal rights of all individuals, families, and groups.
- f) Recognize and advocate for the rights of all individuals to live with dignity in stable living environments, regardless of socio-economic status.
- g) Advocate for fair and just public policies that support mental health rights and the freedom of all people to access these services.
- h) Promote policies and practices that ensure socioeconomic supports for all individuals to live with dignity and security regardless of life circumstances.
- i) Promote policies and practices that help ensure access to fair and safe workplace conditions.
- j) Work with individuals and groups to enhance employment and career success.
- k) Advocate for policies that promote the rights and freedoms of their clients.

5) Promoting Health and Wellness

Professional counsellors promote health and wellness among clients and communities they serve. They endorse healthy practices that support the whole individual, and entire families and communities, who may seek access to services, and support ways of living that enhance quality of life and promote greater overall wellness. *Promoting health and wellness occurs when professional counsellors:*

- a) Respect the equal rights of all people in choosing personal relationships and partners.
- b) Support the overall development of family mental health.
- c) Support processes that promote self-exploration, growth, and development in ways that enhance the dignity of all individuals they serve.

- d) Recognize the importance of work-life balance, both for themselves and the clients they serve.
- e) Recognize the importance of education and mental health services for all individuals in promoting personal and societal understanding and development, and the role of education in supporting mental health development in conjunction with educational knowledge.
- f) Advocate for the mental health of communities in which they live, and offer culturally relevant skills to help individuals, couples, families, or groups exercise healthy growth and psychological development, while exercising freedom within the scope of their laws.

6) Implementing ethical practices in professional counselling

Professional counsellors maintain ethical principles common to other professional healthcare practices and uphold necessary standards to ensure the safety and growth of all clients, families, groups, and communities they serve. Professional practices consider the unique and precise roles within the counselling relationship to ensure that clients experience the best possible outcomes from the services they receive. *Implementing ethical practices in professional counselling when professional counsellors:*

- a) Understand that a basic principle guiding their practice is that, above all, they do no harm and where possible they provide positive assistance.
- b) Recognize the importance of creating a strong therapeutic relationship, while understanding that the way it is established and maintained may vary across cultural settings.
- c) Recognize the scope and boundaries of their cultural competence, exhibit a stance of cultural humility, and take active steps to educate themselves about the cultures they serve.
- d) Understand that dual relationships may arise in counselling, especially in organizations, rural settings, and in areas with limited services, and manage these relationships by maximizing any benefits and minimizing any harm through consultation with colleagues.
- e) Obtain informed consent from individuals, couples, and families that offers clear indications of the purpose of counselling process and the therapeutic relationship, along with the benefits and risks of engaging in active counselling.
- f) Honor the privacy and confidentiality of all clients in a manner that is appropriate to the cultural context and the mode of therapy (i.e. group counselling, couples counselling,

individual counselling), while recognizing the limitations of confidentiality that may exist based on developmental level, safety, or cognitive capacity.

- g) Preserve the integrity of the counselling relationship by highlighting personal dignity, respect, and decision-making while understanding and respecting individual and/or collectivist cultural contexts.
 - h) Describe clear professional standards of counselling practice when establishing a client-counselor relationship, including appropriate boundaries in the context of services (i.e. dual or conflicting relationships, methods of contact, social media) and expectations of goals for success.
 - i) Recognize the value of working with and for a client, emphasizing the client's central role in the decision-making process.
 - j) Remain committed to professional development through ongoing training, education, supervision, and consultation to enhance expertise and support professional and ethical decision-making.
 - k) Integrate all previously described principles into all aspects of counselling, including ethical approaches to research in counselling, assessment procedures, consultation, supervision, program evaluation, collaboration, promotion of counsellor education, and advocacy.
 - l) Promote the integrity of the counselling relationship by seeking to resolve ethical issues through professional supervision and consultation, and within the context of established counselling organizations, licensing boards, associations, or official entities within each particular context.
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