



The Maltese Psychological Association

Ethical Principles of Psychologists

Preamble

The Maltese Psychological Association recognizes its responsibility to participate in the assurance of ethical behaviour on the part of the psychologists. This responsibility is:

1. To members of society who become involved in the service, research and teaching activities of psychology, to the discipline of psychology, and to its own members, and
2. To society in general.

Assuring ethical behaviour includes:

1. The articulation of ethical principles, values, and standards,
2. Promoting those principles, values, and standards through education, peer modelling, and consultation,
3. Developing and implementing methods to help psychologists to monitor their ethical behaviour,
4. Adjudicating complaints of unethical behaviours and,
5. Taking corrective action when such action is warranted.

When principles are in conflict

The four main ethical principles which are the basis of this code of ethics are outlined below. This code advocates that all four principles be taken into account and balanced in ethical decision making.

There will be circumstances in which principles will come in conflict. Thus the four principles below have been ordered according to the weight each generally should be given when they are in conflict, namely:

Principle I: Respect for the Dignity of Persons. This principle generally should be given the highest weight except in circumstances in which there is a clear and imminent danger to the physical safety of any known or unknown individual.

Principle II: Responsible Caring. This principle generally should be given second highest weight. Responsible caring should be carried out only in ways that respect and promote the dignity of persons.

Principle III: Integrity in Relationships. This principle generally should be given the third highest weight. In some circumstances, values such as honesty and straightforwardness will need to be tempered by the values contained in the Principles of respect for the Dignity of persons and responsible Caring.

Principle IV: Responsibility to Society. This principle generally should be given the lowest weight of the four principles when it is conflict with one or more of them. Although it is necessary and important to consider responsibility to society in every ethical decision, adherence to this principle must be subject to and guided by the above principles.

Even with the above ordering of the principles, psychologists will be faced with ethical dilemmas which are difficult to resolve. In such cases, resolution is recognized to be a matter of personal conscience. However, in order to ensure that personal conscience is a legitimate basis for the decision, psychologists are expected to engage in an ethical decision-making process that is explicit enough to bear public scrutiny.

The Ethical Decision Making Process

A board of ethics will be set up to periodically update the code of ethics, and to foster awareness and discussion concerning ethical matters amongst its members.

Responsibility of the Individual Psychologist

Responsibility for the promotion of ethical action among psychologists rests foremost with the individual psychologist. Acceptance to membership in a professional association of psychology commits members:

1. To adhere to the ethical code adopted by the association.
2. To promote and be sensitive to discussion of ethical issues and practices among colleagues.
3. To bring concerns about perceived unethical action directly to psychology colleagues and to attempt to reach an agreement on the issue and, if needed, on the appropriate action to be taken.
4. To co-operate with duly constituted committees of the Association which are concerned with ethics and ethical conduct; and
5. To bring to the attention of the Association ethical issues which require clarification or the development of new guidelines or standards.

Relationship of Code to Personal Behaviour

We recognize that a practicing psychologist is looked upon as a model and the affirmation of their work depends upon their competence in the task of living and relating.

As such a practicing psychologist should be a well balanced person, without ignoring the fact of being human.

While personal life is not to be scrutinized, the psychologist is accountable to society and the association for serious behavioural practices that compromise the image of the practitioner.

1 General Guidelines

1.1 The purpose of the code of ethics is to establish and maintain the standards of the profession and to protect the user of the service provided by psychologists.

1.2 In providing services, psychologists maintain the highest standards of their profession. They act responsibly and make every effort to ensure that their services are used appropriately.

1.3 As practitioners and researchers psychologists know that they bear a heavy social responsibility because their recommendations and professional actions may alter the lives of others. They are alert to personal, social, organizational, financial or political situations that might lead to the misuse of their influence.

2 Responsibilities to Clients

Practicing psychologists should:

2.1 Be dedicated to advancing the well-being of society, families and individuals

2.2 Serve clients with loyalty, determination, and the maximum application of professional skill and competence and make reasonable efforts to ensure that their services are used appropriately. In a group setting, psychologists are also responsible for taking reasonable precautions to protect individuals from physical and/or psychological trauma resulting from interaction within the group.

2.3 Not discriminate against or refuse professional service to anyone on the basis of race, gender, religion, political affiliation, sexual orientation or national origin. They should also not condone, facilitate or collaborate with any form of unjust discrimination.

2.4 Act to prevent or correct practices that are unjustly discriminatory or demeaning.

2.5 Be cognizant of their potentially influential position with respect to clients, and avoid exploiting the trust and dependence of such persons. In the case of clinical and counselling psychologists, they should make every effort to avoid dual relationships with clients that could impair their professional judgment or increase the risk of exploitation. Examples of such dual relationships include, but are not limited to, business or close personal relationships with clients. Engaging in sexual activity with a client is unethical. Sexual relationships with ex-clients are also unethical when the dynamics of the counselling relationship still exists. In a group setting, dual relationships should be avoided when these might impair the therapist's professional judgment, as well as those which are likely to compromise a group member's ability to participate fully in the group.

2.6 Provide clients with accurate and complete information regarding the extent and nature of the services being offered to them and obtain an informed consent for the service. They should also take all reasonable steps to ensure that consent is not given under conditions of coercion. In the case of group therapists they should adequately prepare prospective or new group members by providing as much information about the existing or proposed group as is necessary for a client to make an informed choice. The therapist should also inform group members regarding policies about individual consultation sessions with the therapist and follow up procedures for their groups.

2.7 Should not engage publicly in demeaning descriptions of others, or in remarks or jokes which reflect adversely on the dignity of others. They should abstain from all forms of harassment.

2.8 Respect the right of clients to make decisions on the basis of their beliefs and values and help them to understand the consequences of their decisions and should demonstrate appropriate respect for the knowledge, insight and experience and expertise in their role.

2.9 In the case of psychotherapy, clinical and counselling psychologists should continue therapeutic relationships only so long as it is reasonably clear that clients are benefiting from the relationship.

2.10 Clinical and counselling psychologists should not abandon or neglect clients in treatment without making reasonable arrangements for the continuation of such treatment.

2.11 Assist clients in obtaining other therapeutic services if they are unable or unwilling, for appropriate reasons, to continue seeing a person who had requested professional help. They shall be knowledgeable about the services available in the community and make appropriate referrals for their cases.

2.12 Should seek consultation of colleagues and supervisors on a regular basis, as well as whenever such consultation is in the best interest of the client.

2.13 Should recognize their boundaries of competence and provide only those services and use only those techniques for which they are qualified by training or experience. They should only accept those positions for which they are professionally qualified.

2.14 Clinical and counselling psychologists should, when working in a group setting, screen prospective group members. As much as possible, the therapist should select group members whose needs and goals are compatible with the goals of the group, whose presence will not impede the group process and whose well-being will not be jeopardized by the group experiences.

3 Confidentiality

Psychologists:

3.1 Should, where appropriate, inform their clients of the legal limits of confidentiality. These limits apply where there is clear and imminent danger to a person or persons.

3.2 Should first obtain permission if the client's identity is going to be revealed or can in anyway be deduced. Where governing institutions or agencies require reporting of information, the client's prior consent must be acquired, after informing him or her of the extent and the nature of the information to be revealed and to whom.

3.3 Can discuss information obtained in clinical or consulting relationships only for professional purposes and only with persons clearly concerned with the case. Written and oral reports present only data germane to the purposes of the evaluation, and every effort is made to avoid undue invasion of privacy.

3.4 Use clinical materials in teaching writing and public presentations only if a waiver has been received in accordance with sub-principle 3.2, or when appropriate steps have been taken to completely protect client identity.

3.5 Store or dispose of client records in ways that maintain confidentiality.

3.6 Should afford clients reasonable access to any official records kept about them.

3.7 Should, in a group setting, set a norm of confidentiality regarding all group participants' disclosures.

4 Professional Competence and Integrity

Psychologists should:

4.1. Be fair, reasonable and considerate, regarding payment for the services performed and with due regard for the client's ability to pay.

4.2 Not give or receive any fee or other consideration to or from a third party for the referral of a client.

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4.3 Practice only within their sphere of competence. They accurately represent their abilities, education, training, and experience.

4.4 Avail themselves of opportunities for continuing professional education to maintain and enhance their competence.

4.5 Recognize that personal problems and conflicts may interfere with professional effectiveness. Accordingly, they should refrain from undertaking any professional activity in which their personal problems or conflicts might lead to the inadequate provision of service or harm to the client, colleague, student, or research participant. If involved in such a situation, they seek appropriate professional assistance to help them determine whether they should suspend, terminate, or limit the scope of their professional involvement.

4.6 Be cognizant that if they (a) are convicted of felonies, (b) are convicted of misdemeanours (related to their qualifications or functions), (c) engage in conduct which could lead to conviction of felonies, or misdemeanours related to their qualifications or functions, they are expelled from other professional organizations, or have their licenses or certificates suspended or revoked, are subject to termination or other appropriate action.

4.7 Are responsible, when providing information to the public or to subordinates, peers or supervisors, to ensure that the content is accurate, unbiased, and consists of objective, factual data.

5. Responsibility to the Profession

Psychologists should:

5.1 Act with integrity in their relationships with colleagues and members of other professions. They know and take into account the traditions, practices, and areas of competence of other professionals and cooperate with them fully for the welfare of clients.

5.2 Treat with respect and represent accurately the views, qualifications, and findings of colleagues, and, when expressing judgment on these matters, do so fairly and through appropriate channels.

5.3 Know that a client's health and safety may depend on their receiving appropriate services from members of other professional disciplines. They are responsible for maintaining knowledge of, and appropriately utilizing, the expertise of such professionals on their client's behalf.

5.4 In referring a client to allied professionals, ensure that those to whom they refer clients are recognized members of their own disciplines and as so are competent to carry out the services required.

5.5 When cognizant of an ethical violation by another psychologist, and it seems appropriate, they informally attempt to resolve the issue when appropriately bringing the behaviour to the attention of the said psychologist. If the misconduct is of a minor nature and /or appears to be due to lack of sensitivity, knowledge, or experience, such an informal solution is usually appropriate. Such informal corrective efforts are made with sensitivity to any rights to confidentiality involved. If the violation does not seem amenable to an informal solution, or is of a more serious nature, psychologists should bring it to the attention of the appropriate national committee on professional ethics and conduct.

5.6 In the case of clinical and counselling psychologists, they should not solicit other therapists' clients. If a person is receiving services from another clinical and counselling psychologist, one should not offer one's own services directly to such a person. If a clinical and counselling psychologist is contacted by a person who is already receiving similar services from another professional, the clinical and counselling psychologist should carefully consider that professional relationship, and proceed with caution and sensitivity to the therapeutic issues as well as the client's welfare. The clinical and counselling psychologist discusses these issues with the client(s) so as to minimize the risk of confusion and conflict.

5.7 Not assume professional responsibility for the client(s) of another colleague without appropriate communication with that colleague.

5.8 Should respect confidences shared by colleagues in the course of their professional relationships and transactions.

5.9 Assume overall responsibility for the professional activities of their assistants, students, supervisors and employees with regard to their ethical behaviour in the field.

6 Responsibility to society

Psychologists should:

6.1 Protect the skills, knowledge and interpretations of psychology from being misused, used incompetently, or made useless by others.

6.2 Convey respect for prevailing community laws, mores, social customs, and cultural expectations in all professional activities provided that this does not contravene respect for the dignity of persons, responsible, knowledgeable, effective and respectful way to carry it out.

6.3 Abide by all governmental and institutional laws and regulations unless those laws and regulations seriously conflict with the ethical principles contained herein.

6.4 Speak out when they possess expert knowledge that bears on important societal issues being studied or discussed.

6.5 Be sensitive and alert to the peculiarities and exigencies of the Maltese culture. Importation of knowledge and technology should be done responsibly and with adaptations where necessary.

6.6 Participate in the process of critical self-evaluation of the profession's place in society and about the ways the profession might be contributing to or detracting from beneficial societal functioning and changes.

7 Assessment Techniques

7.1 Psychologists should only use those assessment techniques in the administration of which they are specifically trained.

7.2 In using assessment techniques they should respect the right of clients to have explanations of the nature and purpose of the techniques in language that the client can understand.

7.3 In reporting assessment results, psychologists should indicate any reservations that exist regarding validity or reliability because of the circumstances of the assessment or the inappropriateness of the norms for the person tested. Psychologists should strive to ensure that the results of the assessments and their interpretations are not misused by others.

7.4 Psychologists should make every effort to avoid misuse of assessment reports.

7.5 Psychologists should not encourage or promote the use of psychological assessment techniques by inappropriately trained or otherwise unqualified persons through teaching, sponsorship or supervision.

8 Public statements and advertising of services

8.1 Products or services provided by means of classroom instruction, public lectures, demonstrations, written articles, radio or television programs or other types of media should avoid sensationalism, exaggeration or superficiality. Psychologists should be guided by the primary obligation to aid the public in developing informed judgments, opinions and choices. As teachers, psychologists recognize their primary

obligation to help others acquire knowledge and skill. They maintain high standards of scholarship by presenting psychological information objectively, fully, and accurately.

8.2 Psychologists should neither claim nor imply professional qualifications exceeding those possessed and are responsible for correcting any misrepresentations of these qualifications by others.

8.3 Psychologists should make reasonable effort, when associated with the development or promotion of psychological devices, books, or other products offered for commercial sale, to ensure that announcements and advertisements are presented in a professional, scientifically acceptable, and actually informative manner.

8.4 Announcements or advertisements of personal growth groups, clinics, and agencies should give a clear statement of the purpose and a clear description of the experiences to be provided.

8.5 Psychologists should not compensate or give anything of value to a representative of the press, radio, television, or any other communication medium in anticipation of or in return for professional publicity in a news item.

9 Research and Publication

Psychologists should:

9.1 When conducting research with human subjects, be responsible for the subjects' welfare throughout the experiment and must take all reasonable precautions to avoid injurious psychological, physical and social effects on their subjects.

9.2 When planning research activities with human subjects, be aware of and responsive to all pertinent ethical principles and ensure that the research problem, design and execution are in full compliance with the principles.

9.3 When conducting research, abide by the following basic elements of informed consent:

- a. a fair explanation of the procedures to be followed, including an identification of those which are experimental.
- b. a description of the attendant discomforts and risks
- c. a description of the benefits to be expected
- d. an offer to answer any inquiries concerning the procedures
- e. an instruction that subjects are free to withdraw their consent and to discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time.

9.4 Where possible, the real consent of children and of adults, with impairments in understanding or communication should be obtained. In addition, where research involves all persons less than 16 years of age, consent should be obtained from parents or guardians.

9.5 Intentional deception of the participants over the purpose and general nature of investigation should be avoided whenever possible. Participants should never be deliberately misled without extremely strong scientific or medical justification. Even then, there should be strict controls and a disinterested third party.

9.6 In the light of experience of the investigation, or as a result of debriefing, the participant has a right to withdraw retrospectively any consent given, and to require that their own data, including recordings, be destroyed.

9.7 Studies based on observation must respect the privacy and the psychological well being of the individuals studied. Unless those observed give their consent to being observed, observational research is only acceptable in situations where those observed would accept to be observed by strangers.

9.8 Psychologists who conduct and report research investigations must do so in a manner that minimizes the possibility that the results will be misleading.

9.9 Psychologists who supply data, aid in the research of another person, report research results or make original data available must take due care to disguise the identity of respective subjects in the absence of specific authorization from the subjects to do otherwise.

9.10 When conducting and reporting research, psychologists must be familiar with, and give recognition to, previous work on the topic, must observe all copyright laws, and must follow the principles of giving full credit to those to whom credit is due.

9.11 Psychologists must give due credit through joint authorship, acknowledgement, footnote statements, or other appropriate means to those who have contributed significantly to the research and/or publication, in accordance to such contributions.

In drawing up this code of ethics various other codes of ethics were utilized. These pertain to the following Associations: American Psychological Association, British Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers and Canadian Psychological Association.