

LSE Student Counselling Service

Confidentiality Policy

1. Introduction

The Student Counselling Service recognises the importance of confidentiality for students using the service. It is widely recognised within UK law that counsellors owe a duty of confidence to the client because of the special nature of the relationship, and that maintaining the trust and privacy of personal information is a legitimate expectation for the client. This policy sets out the arrangements for storage and access to information held about clients. It is informed by the Ethical Framework of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (www.bacp.co.uk) and complies with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.

2. Confidentiality Principles

i) Confidentiality is maintained within the Team

Information about the names and contact details of users of the service is kept confidential. The counselling service is part of the Counselling and Wellbeing Team, made up of professionals including counsellors, mental health advisors and other staff within the Disability and Wellbeing Service, together with administrative support for these practitioners. We use a team approach in order to provide the best quality services to our clients, and where necessary, staff from the counselling service may need to liaise with other practitioners within the Team in order to work out the best available treatment options. These discussions are specific and limited. All information that is supplied to the teams and/or received by the teams relating to students is regarded as confidential and is kept securely. All staff working in the administrative office are required to sign a contract to maintain the confidentiality of every person using the service.

ii) Exceptional circumstances and Duty of Care

As a part of the School, the Student Counselling Service has a Duty of Care to students, which includes areas such as standard of care, breach of contract and negligence. There may be exceptional circumstances in which there is a significant concern of a risk of serious harm to a client or an other person. In such an event it may be necessary for information to be shared outside of the Counselling and Wellbeing Team with other health care professionals (eg a Doctor) and/ or a small number of staff within the School; this would be restricted to those with responsibility for the pastoral care and welfare of all members of the University. This would be a most unusual event, but falls within the BACP Ethical Framework and AUCC guidelines (Association of University and College Counselling). Wherever possible, the service would seek the client's agreement to any change in the confidentiality arrangements.

iii) Disability Legislation

Under the Equalities Act (and previously the Disability Discrimination Act), the School is deemed to know of a student's disability if the student makes this known to any member of the School. At the same time, the School recognises that a student has a right to confidentiality under the Data Protection Act and the DDA. The counselling service will pass on relevant information to the Disability and Wellbeing Service (DWS), and this can enable the DWS on behalf of the School to make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of a student. Apart from in the exceptional circumstances outlined above, no information about a student will be passed on to any other member of the School without the explicit consent of the student.

3. Audit and Evaluation Data

An Excel programme is used to record general information about the usage of the service. This statistical information allows the service to maintain an overall picture of service activity, such as the number of appointments made and kept each month, the ratio of Undergraduate and Postgraduate users, and very broad categories listing the reason for seeking counselling. There is no link in this data with any material relating to the content of counselling sessions.

The service also collects evaluation data from students, using electronic evaluation forms. No evaluation information supplied by any individual student can be linked up to their personal notes, and neither will it be disseminated in any form that could possibly identify the student. Data from both the audit and evaluation programmes may be circulated across the School and in other public documents, such as annual reports.

4. Counselling Notes

The counselling service keeps brief notes on the content of each counselling session. These notes are confidential to the service, and are used to record themes and details from each session. They are a subjective record of counselling sessions, and are used to log significant information and assist counsellors in their thinking about their work with each client. These notes are kept in a paper folder in a locked filing cabinet, which is only accessible to the counselling service.

5. Provision of Written Information

Occasionally a student may request a counsellor to provide written information to other members of the University. For example, sometimes it is helpful to liaise with members of staff, such as an academic adviser or Student Services Centre. Such letters or emails will only be written with the student's consent, and can be shared with the student, according to their wish.

6. Supervision

Each counsellor is professionally required to have regular supervision, in which they reflect upon their work with their clients with an experienced and appropriately qualified supervisor. This work is governed by the same principles of confidentiality. For further information see www.bacp.co.uk.

7. Access to Records

Clients have the right to see information stored about them. The only exception is if disclosure of information would be likely to cause serious harm to the physical or mental health or condition of the client. If a student wishes to have a copy of information stored about them, it is recommended that they should discuss this with the counsellor they have been seeing. Alternatively, requests should be put in writing to the Head of Counselling. The Service will reply to such requests within 40 days, and may make a charge of up to £10 for disclosure of information stored on clients.

The counselling service will not provide access to client records if requested by other parties, unless this is with the explicit written consent of the client, or unless directed by a court order. Any other request for copies of the counsellor's notes will be refused.

In no circumstances will the original copies of notes be provided to the client or any other party, even with the consent of the client. Counsellor's notes will be stored for a period of 6 years, and then will be destroyed within a secure and confidential process.

8. Publicity

This Policy is freely available to any Student, member of staff or the public. It will also be made available as a link through the website for the LSE Student Counselling Service.

Adam Sandelson
Head of Counselling

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