

## COUNSELLING SERVICE POLICY ON CONFIDENTIALITY

### **Introduction**

The Counselling Service at NUIM is a professional and confidential service. It adheres to a strict code of ethics and ethical practice as outlined by the Irish Association of Universities and College Counsellors and other professional bodies that counsellors are associated with. The Counselling Service also adheres to its reporting responsibilities under the Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011).

We encourage all students to read our confidentiality policy prior to making any commitment with the Service. At the student's first appointment with the Service confidentiality is discussed and any concerns that the student may have in relation to this are explored.

Confidentiality is also relevant for significant others and third parties who may wish to contact the Service in relation to particular issues or student concerns.

This policy outlines the principles of confidentiality as they apply to our service here in NUI Maynooth. We invite you to read through the policy to understand how it may apply to your query or concern.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is a central and integral part of the counselling process, it offers safety and privacy to those who choose to discuss personal and private concerns and it safeguards against any inappropriate or unnecessary disclosures. Information, written or verbal, given to the Service will be held in the strictest confidence.

### **Limits to Confidentiality**

In exceptional circumstances counsellors may need to break confidentiality.

This occurs in one of two ways:

1. If a strong belief exists that there is a **serious risk** of harm or danger to either the client or another individual. This may relate to issues surrounding sexual/physical/emotional abuse; child sexual abuse; child protection issues; rape; self-harm; suicidal intent; violence or criminal activity.
2. Occasions when disclosure is required as part of a legal process or Garda investigation.

In such instances information may be disclosed to significant others or appropriate third parties without permission being sought. Where possible a full explanation will be given to the client regarding the necessary procedures and intended actions that may need to be taken.

### **Record Keeping**

On engaging with the Service clients are required to complete a number of confidential records pertaining to personal, medical and family details. This is for the mutual protection of both counsellor and client.

Counselling Service files are not attached to any academic record within the University and are held securely and confidentially within the Service for a maximum of ten years.

In addition to the intake forms case notes are attached to the client's file following each session or intervention. These notes are brief and capture a factual account of what was discussed and agreed on. Other relevant documentation such as referral letters, assessments, consent forms, support letters etc are also attached to the file.

A computerised database is maintained by the Service and records information on all service users. This information is for statistical purposes only and is used in the writing of annual reports, submissions etc. No identifying information is ever used in such reports. The database package is secure and password controlled.

### **Service Contact with Students**

Students are asked to give permission to the Service to use a current phone number or address on which they can be contacted in the event of a follow-up or for the purpose rescheduling an appointment. Great care is taken by service staff to maintain confidentiality when contacting students via phone or letter. If there is any uncertainty surrounding voicemail facilities or postal addresses no message or letter will be sent.

### **Sharing of Information**

On occasion it is beneficial for both client and counsellor to share information with another Support Service, Medical Practitioner, Academic Department or External Party.

Apart from exceptions previously mentioned sharing of information is always conducted in collaboration with the client. A signed consent form must be completed prior to any disclosures being made.

Confirmation of attendance at the Service, or any information, written or verbal given by the client will not be disclosed to a third party without the client's written permission. Written permission involves signing the service Consent Form which includes the student's name and ID, the defined purpose for the release of information, a named person to whom the information is directed to, relevant dates and a witness signature by a staff member.

The service policy surrounding letters of support will be explained in the event of such requests been made.

Each client is entitled to refuse consent. This right will be upheld and respected. The potential implications of the decision will be explored and discussed in each case. In some cases it may be inadvisable to continue with counselling in light of such decisions. Clients are free to change their mind regarding consent at any given time irrespective of any initial decisions taken.

## **Referrals**

If a student has been referred to the Service by a third party confirmation of their attendance cannot be given to the referrer. Usually students are encouraged to link back with the referrer if appropriate and let them know they have attended. If a student does not keep this first appointment and a level of risk is highlighted by the referral the Service will inform the third party of the non-attendance in line with the service policy on follow-up. Informing the third party of the non-attendance can occur because the student has not become a client of the Service and no contract of confidentiality has been entered into.

## **Consultations**

The Counselling Service provides a consultative service to all third parties in relation to student issues and concerns. If in any doubt about how to respond or proceed with a student difficulty or concern please feel free to consult with a member of the Counselling Team. This can be done over the phone or by appointment. Seeking clarification is important in effectively managing and addressing the many student issues that present. All consultations are dealt with in strict confidence. Our contact number is **01-7083554** available during office hours.

## **Evaluation**

At the end of each academic year clients of the Service are contacted and requested to complete a Client Feedback Form. This is returned anonymously to the Service and is used solely for the purpose of evaluating the service. No identifying information is asked for and clients are free to return the questionnaire only if they so wish.

## **Supervision**

To ensure best practice in line with professional and ethical guidelines all counsellors associated with the Service are engaged in regular external and internal supervision processes. The purpose of supervision is to assist the counsellors to reflect on and receive guidance and direction in relation to their client work. Client confidentiality is strictly preserved during supervision. No identifying information is released about the client and client files are never removed from the Service for supervision sessions.

## **College Policies**

All information held by the University complies with the requirements of the Data Protection and the Freedom of Information Acts. Information on both Acts can be accessed on the University website.

The Confidentiality Policy of the Counselling Service is in keeping with such policies and other relevant college policies pertaining to the acquisition of personal information.