

CONFIDENTIALITY
GUIDELINES
for
UN SYSTEM COUNSELLORS

UN Staff/Stress Counsellors Special Interest Group

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(Final version)

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Principle of Confidentiality in the Work of Professional Counsellors

Staff/Stress Counsellors in the UN System consult with clients about highly sensitive personal, family and workplace issues. Although from diverse professional backgrounds, the Counsellors share a common ethic respecting the privacy and confidentiality of client information.

The counselling relationship is built on the trust accorded by the clients to the counsellor, who will maintain and respect their privacy and dignity. This trust depends on confidentiality as a fundamental principle of counselling practice (and is indispensable to effective and successful counselling).

This principle is upheld by the standards of relevant professional organizations, international organizations, and country specific laws.

Purpose of these Guidelines

It is recommended that these guidelines be used as minimum standards to inform the development and refinement of organization-specific confidentiality policies for counsellors. They should also promote consistency of confidentiality policies for staff counsellors across the UN System, regardless of the work unit management that oversees the Counsellors' work (e.g., Human Resources, Medical, Security, etc.).

Scope of Confidentiality and Disclosure of Counselling Information

- All consultations by the counsellor with a client are confidential. The boundaries of confidentiality typically would include all counsellors on the team when there is more than one.
- The counsellor must maintain confidentiality, even if the client or other parties may have shared any of this information with others.
- "Client" includes staff, managers, HR staff, or anyone who may reasonably expect that the consultation with the counsellor is professional and private in nature.
- The Counsellor shall not disclose any confidential information without the consent of the client. This includes verbal and written disclosures by the counsellor. Written consent of a client is the standard, but there may be some instances where, temporarily, only verbal consent is possible. In such a case, this should be documented by the counsellor and followed up where possible with written confirmation by the client.
- Exceptions to this required consent should be made when there is a threat or risk to the life of the client or a third party. However, even in such situations, only the minimum information needed to protect the safety of the client or others should be disclosed.

- Counsellors may also share confidential information with their clinical supervisors, as needed, to ensure appropriate care and quality assurance.
- Any action taken by the counsellor on behalf of a staff member is undertaken only with his or her consent.
- Informed consent: At the beginning of the counselling contact, counsellors should inform the client about the extent and limits of confidentiality.

Documentation and Client Records

- Counsellors may keep notes or records of client contacts according to their employing unit's requirements. Such records should not be released to others without the consent of the client.
- Such records of client contacts should be secured and protected from unauthorized access. Specific guidelines for how records are to be protected should be developed by each counsellor's employing unit.
- E-mail communications with or about clients should include only the minimum confidential information needed. Best practice for e-mails containing confidential information is for them to be marked 'confidential' and to have a brief statement at the end regarding confidentiality of the e-mail contents.

Reports of Counseling Data

- Counsellors may be required to share data or statistics with their own managers and others on utilization and trends in counselling work. Such data should be reported only in aggregate form, without names of individual clients or other information that may identify a client.

Accountability

- The counsellor is accountable for maintaining confidentiality. In the event of an exception to this in order to protect the safety of the client or others, the counsellor should inform and consult with her/his supervisor as soon as possible before or after the event.
- Managers and clinical supervisors of counsellors are responsible for holding counsellors accountable to the principle of confidentiality. In the event of a breach of confidentiality by a counsellor, the manager/supervisor would address this with the counsellor and follow up according to the requirements or policies of their own organization.

ANNEX 1 - Sample Consent Form

- Written consent for individual clients should include:
to whom the information will be released; purpose of the release; statement that the client understands that release of information is in their interests; content of information to be released; statement that the consent may be revoked by the client at any time; and the duration of the consent. The form should be signed and dated, if hard copy, or sent by e-mail from the client's e-mail account.
- For managers, HR staff or work groups, consent should include: what information will be released, to whom, and purpose of the release.