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Safeguarding one's fitness to practice as a psychologist

Psychologists need to safeguard their personal psychological and physical wellbeing in order to maintain adequate fitness to practice. It is recommended that psychologists employ self-care practices, risk and stress prevention strategies and deal with personal distress and problems arising from their work. Achieving an appropriate life-work balance is essential in both safeguarding the psychologists' wellbeing and in providing a good quality of service.

For this to be achieved, there needs to be a joint responsibility between the psychologist and the employer. Heads of services where psychologists are employed have a responsibility to ensure that operational policies enable and encourage the guidelines to be followed.

Self-care practices

Caring for oneself is necessary for psychologists to be able to both maintain and develop themselves as competent professionals. Self-awareness is important in both fulfilling ethical guidelines and enabling change when necessary. Self-care practices include but are not limited to the following principles:

- Ensuring personal safety at the place of work by recognising possible risks and taking necessary precautions depending on the place of work such as not seeing clients when alone in a department or building and practicing de-escalation of anger and risk minimisation.
- Considering purchasing professional indemnity insurance to meet any liabilities incurred.
- Attending to personal development needs. This often goes hand-in-hand with professional development and may include personal therapy and peer discussions and support depending on the individual's circumstances.
- Recognising and maintaining an awareness of the interactions of one's personality and the demands of clinical work, whilst also recognizing any possible stress and burnout resulting from this. These issues need to be addressed in order to function competently as a professional.

Risk reduction practices at the place of work

Safeguarding fitness to practice needs to be also maintained by adequate workplace support, which can include but is not limited to the following principles:

- Regular work appraisal that allows for clarity of realistic goals and priorities.
- Regular training on a yearly basis at a minimum and before the adoption of new roles at work.
- Setting guidelines about acceptable workloads. These vary according to type of client group, changing work demands and availability of resources. Typically, caseload decrease with complexity of cases and decreased resources.
- Monitoring of stress levels within psychology departments by senior staff. This includes avoiding procedures that unnecessarily increase staff stress.

Sources of stress

These can arise from a number of factors and need to be addressed accordingly.

- The therapeutic relationship as a source of stress:

The development of the therapeutic relationship can be affected by negative interactions which may develop between a client and psychologist. These may arise in the context of religious or cultural differences, threat or perceived threat of violence, attitudes which conflict, or a discrepancy between level of the psychologist's skill required and the complexities of a client's problems. These concerns need to be identified in confidence with a more experienced colleague in a supportive rather than judgmental milieu. Solutions for such difficulties could also include referring the client to a colleague, especially if the psychologist does not feel competent to continue.

- Personal distress at work

Stress and pressure in the work environment can lead to personal distress which may become unmanageable. Distress can also arise from home or family factors. If the psychologists' fitness to practice is being impaired by high levels of personal distress, they have a duty to seek support and guidance to explore ways to resolve the distress in an appropriate manner. Colleagues should also act sensitively and responsibly in their regard and offer encouragement and support. Support could take a variety of forms including provision of therapy, personal support and supervision. However, it is not appropriate for personal therapy to be provided by colleagues within the same department and it is advisable that supervision is also sought outside the immediate work context.

- Workplace stressors

Workplace stress can originate from a number of sources, including inadequate staffing levels, dealing with excessive or inappropriate referrals, unclear roles and lack of safety. Conflicts in the

organization, inconsistent or rigid management styles, unclear boundaries and uncertainty at the workplace can also lead to distress at the workplace.

Such factors may reduce the ability of the psychologist to perform at optimal level and inevitably affect the quality of service being offered to clients. It is the duty of both the psychologists and their managers to address such issues and ensure that the workplace is a setting which promotes mutual support, collaboration and concern for colleagues' well-being. Often these factors need to be addressed at a system level.

Acknowledgements

This document draws on material from The British Psychological Society, Division of Clinical Psychology, Professional Practice Guidelines.