

Ethical guidelines for sexologists

Introduction

The goal of these instructions is to help people working on the field of sexology to grasp the significance of ethics in their own work. These instructions are not to be taken as rules but more as tools which allow one to make ethical contemplation a part of their everyday work routine. Ethics are not about giving orders and abiding rules but about internalising the responsibility for one's decisions even in difficult situations. Ethical action depends on the situation because people and their conditions vary. Therefore it is good for sexologists to be sensitive to the ethical dimensions of the situations they encounter in their work.

These guidelines are aimed especially for people working as sexual therapists, counsellors or educators. Some parts may also be applicable to sexological research. Furthermore, these guidelines are designed to help sexologists' clients and others who are interested in the ethical principles guiding above-mentioned professionals. These instructions do not replace ethical guidelines created for particular professions or institutions but are meant to be used as an addition to them. In case these guidelines collide with local laws, the laws should be abided.

Ethical principles

Autonomy: A sexologist respects the client's autonomy, which includes the right to start and terminate the client relationship. Sexologist does not guide or tend to the client against his or her will or in secret but rather aims to enhance the client's own capability to make decisions concerning himself or herself, also taking into account the well-being of others close to the client.

Integrity: A sexologist respects the client's bodily integrity. Any touching connected to the client relationship or procedures that require physical contact must be explained beforehand for and given a permission to by the client. Integrity also includes mental and emotional boundaries, which are to be respected. When the client relationship demands dealing with things that may be difficult for the client, the sexologist always tries to come to an agreement with the client about suitable approaches or methods for dealing with such issues.

Confidentiality: The discussions between the sexologist and the client, all the information and documents concerned and the existence of the client relationship are confidential. Any information about them may not be disclosed to anyone without the client's consent.

Client's interest: A sexologist acts mainly for the client's best interest. Understanding of the client's interest should be based on a consensus between the sexologist and the client. If other interests, such as forwarding sexological research by the sexologist, are involved, they should be made known to the client immediately. In the case of conflict of interests, the client's interest comes always first.

Value neutrality: A sexologist should be unbiased towards the client's values about his/her way of life, sexuality and relationships. He/she tries not to force any specific set of values or ideas about sexuality on the client. The sexologist tries to identify the impact of their own values and ideas on their work and consider their own motivations and emotions in client relationships. Neutrality does not mean avoiding value discussions but that different value choices are respected.

Professionalism: A sexologist takes care that their professional knowledge and skill levels are as high as possible. He/she should recognise any professional lacks and know how to direct the client, if necessary, to better or more suitable professional help. The sexologist also tries to identify situations where he/she is disqualified to start a client relationship when the client is, for example, a relative or a member of a mutual group of friends.

Description of good practise

Client relationship: A sexologist ensures that relationship between him/her and the client remains professional at all times. The sexologist will never enter a sexual relationship with the client and will also make sure that the relationship stays professional on the emotional level as well.

Fairness: A sexologist treats all clients fairly without discriminating anyone on the basis of ethnic origin, status, sex, age, religion, disability or sexual orientation.

Client orientation: A sexologist always pays attention to the client's age and the level of development and to possible constraints that may be due to, for instance, language proficiency, cultural background, disability or mental abilities.

Transparency: A sexologist makes sure that the client understands the meaning of the methods and concepts used in the sessions. The client should also be informed about the sexologist's educational background and possible commitments to particular schools of thought or forms of therapy. The sexologist will try to promote the mutual understanding between him/her and the client by being open about his/her goals and motivations and by repeatedly making sure that the client has understood him/her correctly.

Physical contact: The use of methods involving physical contact requires that the sexologist has the appropriate training or education to use them. The sexologist will always explain to the client why and how these methods are implemented. The use of such methods always requires permission from the client.

Disclosing information: A sexologist may provide information about the client only with his/her written consent. The sexologist ensures that the consent is properly and clearly given and that the client has a possibility to familiarise himself beforehand with the information being forwarded. The client can only give a consent to disclosing information about himself or herself, for instance in a group or couples' therapy setting. In this case, it should be ensured that the confidentiality of other clients' information is not compromised.

Boundaries of confidentiality: A sexologist may disclose information about his/her client only in situations where national laws or the threat of imminent and serious danger so require.

Retention of information: A sexologist ensures that all client information and records are kept in a safe and locked place, so that no-one can get a hold of them without the proper authorization. The client has the right to check his/her data and its security on demand.

Recording sessions: A sexologist will always ask for a written permission from the client if he/she makes recordings of the sessions with audio or video equipment. The client should be informed about how and what for the sessions are recorded.

Well-being at work: A sexologist will seek proper professional guidance and take care of his/her well-being so that he/she will be able to maintain good professional and ethical standards in his/her own work.

Self-evaluation: A sexologist will evaluate his/her work and relationship to the clients critically. He/she will seek to identify any problematic points in the client relationship and correct his/her own actions and approach in the situations that have caused the problems. Self-evaluation encompasses the entire job description - both the professional and interaction skills as well as the emotions raised by the work.

Other codes of ethics: The following instructions are applied to sexological research concerning human subjects: 1) World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (1964/1989), and 2) World Health Organization Proposed International Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects (1982).

In Helsinki on 6 June 2009
The ethical division of the Finnish association for Sexology
Chairman Tommi Paalanen