# Ethics and Professional Foundations

THE TALKING THERAPIES UK PRACTITIONER SERIES



# Ethics and Professional Foundations

The ethical frameworks, boundaries, confidentiality and record-keeping every practitioner must own.

Foundation level · 6 hours of continuing professional development

**TALKING THERAPIES UK**

First edition · 2026

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First edition, 2026.

This manual accompanies the Ethics and Professional Foundations course in the Talking Therapies UK Digital Classroom, from which its content is drawn and against which it is kept current.

Revision 3. This printing was set on 3 November 2026 from the course as it stood that day.

A note on the clinical material. Every case in this book is a fictional composite written for teaching. No real person appears in it, however disguised. Nothing here constitutes clinical supervision, and nothing in it replaces the judgement of a qualified practitioner working within their competence, their professional body's code and their local governance. Where guidance is cited it was current at the date of this edition; readers must check the standing of any guidance before relying on it.

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# How to use this manual

Clinical skill keeps clients safe inside sessions; professional discipline keeps them safe everywhere else. Ethics, boundaries, confidentiality and records are not administrative extras but the load-bearing structure of trustworthy practice, and every practitioner must own them personally. This course teaches that structure from the ground up.

The first module teaches the shared ethical core that underlies the BACP, UKCP, HCPC and BPS frameworks alike, the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice and fidelity, and how to reason with them when they collide, then turns to boundaries as the protective frame: time, place, money, touch, self-disclosure and dual relationships, with the drift patterns that precede most serious breaches. The second module covers confidentiality and its real limits, consent as a process rather than a signature, and record-keeping that serves the client, the clinician and the law at once, UK GDPR included.

Full written lessons with key points and practice tasks drawn from realistic dilemmas, with a built-in study tutor throughout. Six hours of CPD, around six months of access, a final assessment, and a personalised certificate on passing. Foundational for trainees; a rigorous refresher for everyone else.

This manual is the written form of a course taught in the Talking Therapies UK Digital Classroom. It is set at foundation level and carries 6 hours of continuing professional development for practitioners who complete the accompanying course and its assessment.

It is written to be read in order. Each part opens with what it is for; each chapter teaches one idea to a working depth and closes with the points worth keeping and a practice task that converts reading into something you do. The tasks are the part most often skipped and the part that most reliably changes practice, and several of them are designed to be taken to supervision rather than completed alone.

The figures are teaching diagrams rather than decoration. Each is the conventional form of a model you will meet in the literature and in

supervision, drawn in one visual language across the whole series so that the shape of an idea is recognisable wherever it reappears.

Where a chapter draws on published work, the reference is named in the text and gathered in the further reading at the back. Terms of art are defined in the glossary, which is worth reading straight through once before you begin.

### What this manual will leave you able to do

- Apply the BACP Ethical Framework's principles and values to everyday clinical decisions
- Explain confidentiality, its limits, and how to discuss both with clients
- Operate informed consent and contracting as ongoing practices, not paperwork
- Recognise and manage dual relationships, gifts, touch and self-disclosure boundaries
- Meet record-keeping and data protection duties under UK GDPR in clinical work
- Use supervision, and know what it is for at this stage of practice

PART 1

# Principles and boundaries

*The shared ethical core, and the frame that protects.*

CHAPTER 1

# The shared ethical core

The professional landscape of psychotherapy in the United Kingdom is populated by a number of statutory and voluntary regulatory bodies, each of which publishes a distinct ethical or conduct framework. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) offers the Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions; the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) provides its Code of Ethics; the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) sets out the Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics; and the British Psychological Society (BPS) supplies guidance on ethical practice for psychologists. Although the language, structure and emphasis of these documents differ, they converge on a shared ethical core that underpins every therapeutic encounter. This core is composed of six interlocking principles: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, fidelity and self-respect. Understanding how these principles operate, how they sometimes clash, and how a practitioner can navigate such clashes is the essence of ethical maturity.

Beneficence, the commitment to act for the client's good, is perhaps the most intuitively familiar principle. It demands that the therapist continually ask, "What will promote the client's wellbeing?" Non-maleficence, the counterpart to beneficence, requires the therapist to avoid causing harm, including the subtle harms that can arise from well-intentioned interventions. Autonomy recognises the client as a self-governing agent, entitled to make choices even when those choices appear irrational or risky to the therapist. Justice obliges the practitioner to treat all clients fairly, to distribute resources equitably, and to be vigilant against systemic discrimination. Fidelity is the promise-keeping dimension of the therapeutic relationship, encompassing confidentiality, reliability and the honouring of agreements. Finally, self-respect, a principle explicitly highlighted by the BACP, reminds the therapist that professional effectiveness is contingent upon the practitioner's own wellbeing, boundaries and moral integrity; neglect of self-respect erodes the other principles.

These six principles are not rules; they are normative guides that require judgement. A rule is a prescriptive statement that can be applied uniformly –

for example, “A therapist must not accept gifts of more than £10” – whereas a principle invites reflection on the particularities of each situation. The distinction is crucial because the lived reality of therapeutic work is replete with moments where principles are in tension. A client may assert a desire to return to a relationship that the therapist recognises as abusive, pitting autonomy against beneficence. A therapist may be asked to keep a confidence that, if maintained, could place a third party at risk, thereby juxtaposing fidelity with non-maleficence. A waiting list for a highly effective intervention may force the therapist to balance justice with beneficence, as the therapist must decide how to allocate limited slots.

Ethical moments, therefore, do not arrive with fanfare or dramatic warning signs. They are often embedded in the mundane flow of sessions: a client offers a modest gift at termination; a request is made to extend a session by fifteen minutes on a single occasion; a therapist encounters a client at a family wedding; a colleague makes an off-hand comment about a shared client’s progress; a referral is discovered to be a former partner of a friend. In each case the situation is ordinary, yet each is an ethical event that demands deliberate attention. The untrained response is to rely on instinct, to improvise, and to hope that the decision will not later be judged harshly. Such improvisation is the breeding ground for ethical drift, where small compromises accumulate into larger breaches.

The process by which a therapist can respond to an ethical moment is both learnable and portable. It begins with a pause – a brief mental stop that creates space for reflection rather than reflex. In that pause the therapist names the principles that are in play and recognises the tension among them. The next step is to consult the relevant professional framework, not as a source of a definitive answer, but as a repository of the profession’s collective wisdom. The frameworks often contain commentary, case examples and decision-making aids that illuminate how the profession has historically navigated similar dilemmas. Following the framework, the therapist should seek supervision. Supervision provides a safe arena in which the therapist can articulate the dilemma, test assumptions and receive feedback from a more experienced practitioner. Importantly, supervision should be sought before acting whenever possible, because the moments that feel too trivial to raise are often the ones that harbour the greatest risk of hidden bias or unintended harm.

After supervision, the therapist makes a decision, acts, and then records the reasoning. Documentation serves two purposes. First, it offers professional protection: a clear record of the deliberative process can demonstrate that the therapist acted responsibly should a complaint arise. Second, and more profoundly, the act of writing forces the therapist to articulate the rationale in a way that can be scrutinised by oneself and by others. The discipline of recording transforms a fleeting intuition into a considered judgment, and it cultivates a habit of accountability that reinforces ethical practice over time.

To illustrate the process in concrete terms, consider the following vignette involving a therapist, Maya, who works within a private practice that adheres to the BACP Ethical Framework, the UKCP Code of Ethics and the HCPC Standards. Maya has been working with Sam, a 34-year-old client, for twelve months. Their work has focused on Sam’s long-standing anxiety, measured regularly with the GAD-7, and depressive symptoms, monitored with the PHQ-9. Over the course of therapy Sam has made substantial progress: his GAD-7 scores have fallen from 16 to 6, and his PHQ-9 scores have dropped from 14 to 5. In the final session Sam arrives with a small, hand-crafted wooden box containing a set of tea biscuits, a token of gratitude for Maya’s support.

Maya’s immediate, instinctive reaction is conflicted. On the one hand, the BACP Ethical Framework includes a guideline that therapists should not accept gifts that could influence the therapeutic relationship, and the HCPC Standards caution against accepting items that could be perceived as a quid-pro-quo. On the other hand, Sam’s gesture appears sincere, modest and culturally significant – in his family tradition, offering food is a way of expressing respect and closure. Maya recognises that the principles of beneficence and fidelity are pulling her towards accepting the gift, as refusing it might undermine the therapeutic alliance that has been so hard-won. Conversely, non-maleficence urges her to consider whether accepting the biscuits could unintentionally reinforce a pattern of Sam seeking external validation through material tokens, a pattern that was part of his presenting problem.

Maya pauses, names the principles – beneficence, non-maleficence, fidelity, autonomy – and notes the tension. She then consults the BACP Ethical Framework, which advises that the therapist should consider the value, meaning and timing of any gift, and that a modest, culturally appropriate

token given at termination may be acceptable if it does not compromise professional boundaries. She also reviews the UKCP Code, which emphasises the importance of cultural competence and the need to respect the client's cultural expressions of gratitude. With these references in mind, Maya arranges a brief supervision session with her senior supervisor, Dr Patel, later that week. In supervision she articulates the dilemma, outlines the principles involved, and asks for perspective on the potential impact of accepting the gift on Sam's therapeutic gains and on Maya's own sense of professional integrity.

Dr Patel reflects that Sam's request to give the biscuits is an act of autonomy and a sign of the therapeutic work's success – Sam feels safe enough to express gratitude in a culturally resonant way. Dr Patel also notes that the modest nature of the gift, its timing at termination, and the fact that it does not carry monetary value, all mitigate the risk of undue influence. However, Dr Patel cautions Maya to be mindful of future boundaries: accepting the gift should be accompanied by a clear verbal acknowledgement of its meaning and a reaffirmation that the therapeutic relationship has now concluded.

Having integrated the framework guidance and supervisory input, Maya decides to accept the biscuits, but she does so deliberately. She thanks Sam, acknowledges the cultural significance of the gesture, and states, "I appreciate this token of thanks; it reflects the respect you have for the work we have done together, and I will keep it as a reminder of your progress." Maya then records the decision in her clinical notes, writing: "Client presented a modest, culturally appropriate gift at termination. After pausing to identify relevant ethical principles (beneficence, non-maleficence, fidelity, autonomy), consulting the BACP Ethical Framework and UKCP Code, and discussing with supervisor, I accepted the gift, noting its symbolic value and ensuring that no expectation of future therapeutic contact was implied. Decision documented for accountability and future reference."

The vignette demonstrates how an apparently trivial event becomes an ethical moment when the therapist recognises the underlying principles, consults the professional framework, seeks supervision, makes a reasoned decision, acts, and records the process. The outcome is not dramatic – the biscuits are enjoyed, the therapeutic relationship ends on a positive note, and no boundary is breached – yet the ethical quality of the encounter is

markedly enhanced by the deliberate process.

Beyond isolated incidents, the shared ethical core provides a scaffold for the therapist's ongoing professional development. Beneficence and non-maleficence together form the classic Hippocratic tradition, reminding practitioners that the desire to help must always be balanced by a vigilance against harm. Autonomy, rooted in the liberal philosophical tradition of John Stuart Mill, affirms the client's right to self-determination, a right that is especially salient in contemporary practice where power differentials are scrutinised. Justice, echoing the work of Rawls and the social justice orientation of modern psychotherapy, compels therapists to consider equity of access, cultural competence and the broader societal structures that affect mental health. Fidelity, a concept drawn from the relational ethics of Carl Rogers and later elaborated by scholars such as Michael J. Mahoney, underscores the centrality of trust in the therapeutic contract. Self-respect, a principle championed by the BACP, aligns with the growing evidence that therapist burnout and compassion fatigue undermine therapeutic effectiveness; the literature on therapist self-care (e.g., Norcross & Guy, 2007) demonstrates that practitioners who attend to their own wellbeing are better able to uphold the other ethical principles.

The convergence of these principles across the BACP, UKCP, HCPC and BPS frameworks is not accidental. Each body, in its own historical and disciplinary context, has arrived at a consensus that these values are essential for safeguarding both client and practitioner. The HCPC Standards, for instance, articulate that "practitioners must act with integrity, honesty and fairness" – a formulation that mirrors beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. The BPS Code of Ethics explicitly states that psychologists must "respect the dignity and worth of all persons" and "recognise the importance of cultural diversity," echoing autonomy and justice. The UKCP Code adds a commitment to "maintain professional boundaries" and to "promote the welfare of clients," reinforcing fidelity and beneficence. By internalising this shared core, the therapist builds a resilient ethical identity that can weather the inevitable ambiguities of practice.

Developing ethical maturity, therefore, is not a matter of memorising the wording of each code. It is the capacity to recognise an ethical moment when it arrives undramatically, to pause, to name the principles in tension, to consult the collective wisdom of the profession, to engage supervision, to

decide and act, and finally to document the reasoning. This disciplined approach transforms everyday clinical work into a practice of continual ethical reflection. It also aligns with the evidence base on reflective practice, which shows that clinicians who engage in systematic reflection demonstrate higher levels of ethical decision-making and lower rates of ethical breaches (Karnieli-Miller, 2019). Moreover, the act of recording reasoning supports the therapeutic contract by providing transparency; clients who are invited to understand the rationale behind boundary decisions often report greater trust and satisfaction.

In sum, the shared ethical core of beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, fidelity and self-respect constitutes the foundation upon which all UK therapeutic practice rests. Ethical moments are embedded in the ordinary flow of sessions, and the practitioner's skill lies in recognising them, applying a structured deliberative process, and documenting the outcome. By weaving together the guidance of the BACP Ethical Framework, the UKCP Code of Ethics, the HCPC Standards and the BPS guidance, and by grounding decisions in supervision and reflective recording, the therapist cultivates an ethical stance that is both principled and pragmatic. This stance not only protects the client and the practitioner but also upholds the integrity of the profession as a whole, ensuring that the therapeutic endeavour remains a trustworthy, compassionate and just enterprise.

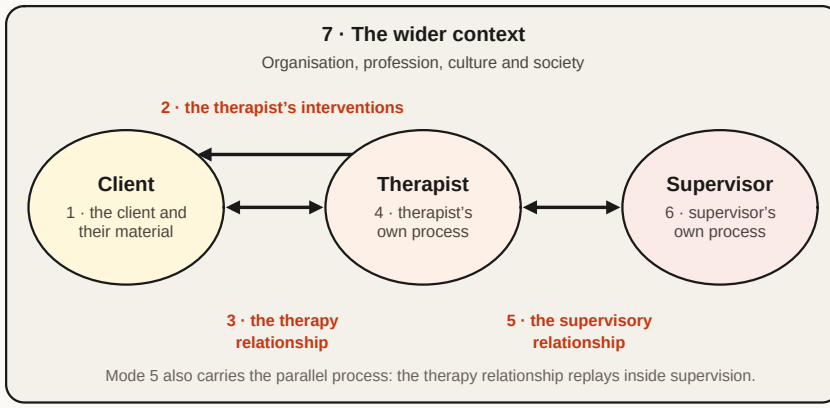



**FIGURE 1.1 The seven-eyed model of supervision**

*Hawkins and Shohet's seven modes give supervision its lenses: the client and their material, the therapist's interventions, the therapy relationship, the therapist's own process, the supervisory relationship itself (including parallel process), the supervisor's process, and the wider organisational and social context around all of it.*

## Points worth keeping

- The frameworks converge: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, fidelity, self-respect
- Ethical moments arrive undramatically
- Process: principles, framework, supervision, recorded reasoning

**PRACTICE TASK**

*Take a small dilemma (a client brings a £10 gift) and write your reasoning through two conflicting principles to a decision.*

CHAPTER 2

# Boundaries: the protective frame

Boundaries constitute the protective frame within which therapeutic intimacy can be safely explored. The therapeutic relationship invites a level of disclosure and dependency that would be hazardous in any other context; it is precisely the constancy of the frame—its limits of time, place, fee, role, and contact—that renders that invitation ethical. When a client knows that the session will begin and end at the agreed hour, that the therapist's office is a neutral space, that the fee is set and collected according to a contract, and that any self-disclosure or touch will be purposefully negotiated, the client can risk attachment and honesty without fear of exploitation. In this way, boundaries protect the client, preserve the integrity of the work, and, candidly, shield the practitioner from the quiet enlistment of personal needs.

The dimensions of the frame each demand discipline. Time is regulated so that sessions start and finish as scheduled; this prevents the therapeutic hour from becoming a substitute for personal time and guards against the erosion of the therapist's own boundaries. The setting is typically a professional office or a similarly neutral environment; therapy conducted in cafés, cars, or a client's home without explicit justification transforms the encounter into something other than a therapeutic contract. Fees are articulated in advance, written into a service agreement, and collected consistently; arrears that go unaddressed already signal a weakening of the boundary. Touch, though culturally mediated, is approached with explicit consent and a clear therapeutic rationale, and many schools of psychotherapy advise that any physical contact be limited to a handshake unless a specific modality (such as certain somatic therapies) justifies otherwise. Self-disclosure is guided by the principle that it serves the client's therapeutic goals rather than the therapist's personal desire for connection. Gifts, whether offered by the client or the therapist, are deliberated in supervision before acceptance or provision, and contact between sessions—whether via telephone, email, or text—is pre-negotiated, with response times and emergency protocols clearly defined.

The field draws a critical distinction between boundary crossings and boundary violations, a taxonomy first articulated by Gutheil and Gabbard

(1993). A boundary crossing is a deviation from the strictest practice that is considered benign, and potentially beneficial, provided it is motivated by the client's needs and reviewed in supervision. Examples include attending a client's graduation after a careful deliberation, making a brief home visit for a housebound client, or offering a modest, culturally appropriate gift when it serves the therapeutic alliance. In contrast, a boundary violation serves the practitioner's needs at the client's expense and includes behaviours such as sexual contact, financial exploitation, or any action that undermines the client's autonomy. Violations are not merely ethical breaches; they are empirically linked to poorer outcomes, loss of licensure, and, in the case of sexual misconduct, catastrophic harm to the client and the profession.

Research on the progression from crossing to violation reveals a predictable gradient. Studies by Pope and Vetter (1991) and more recently by McAlinden and colleagues (2021) demonstrate that many violations begin as a series of seemingly innocuous exceptions: sessions that gradually run longer, appointments that shift later in the day, an increasing sense that the client is "special" or "different," and a growing reluctance to discuss these shifts with a supervisor. Each incremental change may be rationalised as a compassionate response, yet the cumulative effect is a drift away from the agreed frame. The first rationalisation—often an internal dialogue that the client is uniquely deserving of an exception—should be recognised as the sentinel event that triggers supervisory review. The professional stance, therefore, is not rigid inflexibility but a disciplined openness to difference that is explicitly examined in supervision before it becomes conduct.

Supervision, as the first line of rationalisation, functions as the protective filter for the therapeutic frame. When a therapist feels a tug to bend a rule, the appropriate response is to bring that tug into supervision, articulate the perceived client need, and explore alternative strategies that maintain the integrity of the frame. The supervisory conversation should surface the therapist's own motivations, the potential impact on the client, and the ethical guidelines that govern the profession, such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions. The reluctance to mention an exception is itself a diagnostic clue; the more a therapist hesitates, the more likely the exception is moving from a crossing towards a violation.

A concrete worked example illustrates the protective function of supervision.

Emma, a trainee counsellor, works with a client named Sam who has a history of complex trauma and chronic self-injury. Over the course of six weeks, Emma notices three patterns: each session with Sam extends by an average of twelve minutes beyond the scheduled ninety minutes; Emma begins to schedule Sam's appointments as the final slot of the day, citing "availability" but feeling an unarticulated desire to give Sam extra time; and Sam's crises increasingly occur on weekends, prompting Emma to consider giving Sam her personal mobile number. Emma feels a growing sense of responsibility for Sam's safety and worries that refusing a weekend contact might exacerbate Sam's distress. Recognising the first rationalisation, Emma raises the issue in supervision. The supervisor, Dr. Patel, asks Emma to articulate the specific therapeutic purpose of each proposed boundary shift. Together they review the BACP guidelines on out-of-hours contact, consider alternative solutions such as arranging a crisis plan with Sam's existing support network, and decide that the personal mobile number would constitute a boundary violation because it blurs the professional role and introduces a personal dimension that is not therapeutically justified. Dr. Patel also highlights that the pattern of longer sessions and last-slot scheduling reflects a subtle drift towards a crossing that, if left unchecked, could evolve into a violation. The supervisory team formulates a concrete plan: Emma will adhere strictly to the ninety-minute limit, rotate Sam's appointments to earlier slots when possible, and refer Sam to an on-call crisis service for weekend emergencies. Emma implements the plan, and Sam reports feeling more secure, noting that the clear limits provide a sense of predictability that had been missing from his chaotic life. In this vignette, the supervision process intercepted the rationalisation, restored the protective frame, and turned the boundary negotiation itself into a therapeutic intervention that reinforced Sam's learning that limits can be safe and supportive.

The protective frame also aligns with the relational model of the therapeutic alliance proposed by Bordin (1979), which posits that a strong alliance consists of agreement on goals, tasks, and the bond. Boundaries underpin the "tasks" component by delineating what is permissible within the therapeutic work, and they reinforce the "bond" by establishing trust that the therapist will act in the client's best interest, not the therapist's own. When boundaries are respected, the client can engage fully with the therapeutic tasks, knowing that the therapist's actions are predictable and ethically

grounded. Conversely, when boundaries are breached, the bond is jeopardised, and the client may experience retraumatization or a loss of trust that undermines the entire therapeutic process.

It is essential to recognise that the protective frame is not a barrier to empathy or authenticity. Rogers' (1957) concept of unconditional positive regard is compatible with a firm frame; the therapist can convey warmth, empathy, and acceptance while maintaining clear limits. Indeed, the very presence of a stable frame can enhance the client's sense of safety, allowing deeper emotional work to occur. The therapist's role is to balance the paradox of being both a caring human being and a professional guardian of the therapeutic contract.

In practice, maintaining the frame requires continual self-monitoring and a habit of reflective documentation. Therapists are encouraged to keep a brief log after each session noting any deviations from the agreed parameters, the rationale for those deviations, and whether supervision was consulted. This habit not only provides an audit trail but also cultivates a mindset of accountability. When a therapist observes a pattern of boundary stretching, the log becomes a source of evidence for supervisory discussion and, if necessary, for ethical review.

The ethical foundations of the protective frame are enshrined in the UK's professional codes. The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics stipulate that practitioners must "maintain appropriate boundaries with service users and colleagues" and "ensure that professional relationships are not compromised by personal interests". The BACP Ethical Framework further emphasises that "the therapist's primary responsibility is to the client's welfare" and that any exception to the agreed frame must be "transparent, justified, and documented". These standards reinforce the notion that boundaries are not optional niceties but core components of professional competence.

Finally, the protective frame is a dynamic structure that must be revisited as therapy progresses. As clients develop greater insight and resilience, the therapist may negotiate new boundaries that reflect the client's evolving needs—for example, transitioning from weekly to fortnightly sessions, or gradually reducing the intensity of crisis support as the client builds internal coping resources. Such renegotiations are best undertaken collaboratively, with explicit discussion of the therapeutic purpose and documentation in the

treatment plan. By treating the frame as a living agreement rather than a static rule, therapists model healthy boundary negotiation for their clients, thereby extending the therapeutic benefits beyond the immediate session.

In summary, boundaries are the scaffolding that makes therapeutic intimacy safe. They protect the client from exploitation, preserve the integrity of the therapeutic work, and guard the practitioner against the subtle enlistment of personal needs. The distinction between crossing and violation, first articulated by Gutheil and Gabbard, provides a useful heuristic, but the crucial safeguard is the early identification of rationalisations and their examination in supervision. Through disciplined self-monitoring, adherence to professional ethical codes, and collaborative renegotiation of the frame, therapists can maintain a protective environment that enables clients to explore the deepest parts of their experience with confidence and security.

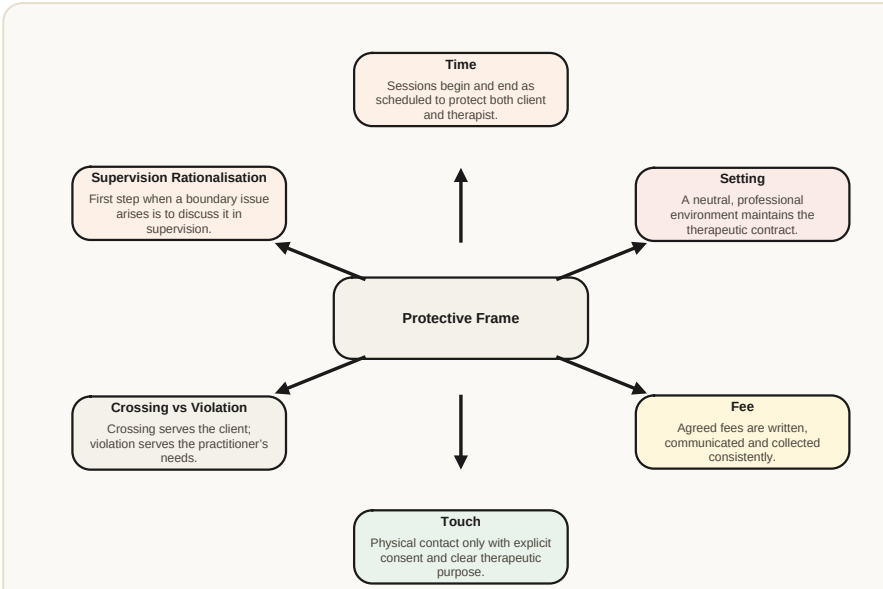



**FIGURE 2.1 Protective Frame of Boundaries**

*Boundaries create a safe therapeutic space for intimacy. Each dimension of the frame supports client safety and practitioner integrity.*

### Points worth keeping

- Boundaries make intimacy safe; they protect client and work
- Crossing (considered, client-serving) versus violation (practitioner-serving)
- The first rationalisation is the supervision item

**PRACTICE TASK**

*Write down the boundary you personally would find easiest to rationalise loosening, and the early sign it is happening.*