

Your Rights

As a Counselling Client

At SACE, we believe people can heal. Although healing looks different for each individual, many people will choose to access counselling services at some point after an experience of sexual violence. We believe that it is important for you to understand your rights as a client if you choose to access counselling. As a client, you have the right to:

1. Be treated with respect and dignity.

You have the right to be treated with respect and dignity. Because sexual violence is an abuse of power and trust, it is essential for your counsellor to treat you with respect and dignity and to earn your trust. This includes your right to access inclusive, non-discriminatory, and professional services regardless of age, race, gender, culture, language, religion, sexual orientation, or ability. SACE works to create an environment of inclusivity and cultural safety. If you are not sure about your counsellor's experience working with your presenting concerns, you can ask them.

2. Consent.

You have the right to consent to any part of treatment.

- SACE operates within a culture of consent. This means that we support your right to consent or not consent to any activity within the counselling process. You have this right regardless of where you are accessing counselling.
- This includes the right to say yes, no, maybe, I'm not sure, I don't know, or ask again later to anything that is offered in counselling.

- You have the right to change your mind. Consent for services can be withdrawn at any time during counselling. You can also withdraw consent for particular parts of the counselling process without stopping counselling altogether (example: you could decide that online counselling no longer works for you and request in-person appointments instead).



3. Privacy and confidentiality.

You have the right to privacy and confidentiality. All counselling by a regulated health care professional (counsellor, social worker, or psychologist) is confidential. This means that the information shared with your counsellor will not be shared outside of the counselling session without your written permission.

- It is important to know that there are some limits to confidentiality that are related to safety and the law. Generally, the most common limits to confidentiality are if you share that you are at risk of harming yourself or someone else, or if a child is in danger of abuse or neglect. Your counsellor will discuss these limits with you as part of the consent process for counselling.

Your right to privacy means you have the right to understand the information that is collected about you and to know how it is documented, stored and used. As a health care professional, your counsellor must follow a code of ethics that states how your information is collected and stored. This includes only documenting information that is needed to provide you with ethical services.

4. Understanding what counselling is.

You have the right to understand the process of counselling. This includes understanding your counsellor's approach to the counselling process (also known as their grounding theory or theoretical orientation), their professional experience (including licensing body), their fees (if applicable – at SACE, all our services are offered at no fee), if they are receiving supervision, and how to go about filing a complaint if you experience harm during the counselling process.

You also have the right to collaborate with your counsellor throughout your counselling experience. An example of collaboration is goal setting, which usually occurs early in the counselling process. Your counsellor will want to hear your ideas about what you would like to work on in counselling, and they will have some ideas about how to help you get there. Together, you will step forward into this part of your healing journey.



5. Understand your counsellor's approach.

You have the right to understand the approach (modality) that your counsellor may use. There are lots of different approaches to counselling and some methods may feel like a better fit than others for a person or particular concern. Some of the approaches we use at SACE include trauma informed practice, person-centred counselling, feminist counselling, the tri-phasic model of trauma counselling, and somatic counselling approaches.

Trauma informed practice (Knight, 2019): Using a trauma informed approach means understanding that any person we interact with may have experienced something challenging or traumatic in their life. From this place of understanding, your counsellor then works to ensure that therapy does not become another traumatic experience for you. Trauma informed practice is based on the principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. A trauma informed counsellor will work to help you feel physically and emotionally safe in counselling, build a relationship based on trust, offer you choices during the counselling process, support you to feel empowered within counselling, and collaborate with you on your healing journey.

5. Understand your counsellor's approach. (continued)

Person-centred counselling (Rogers, 1957): This is a non-judgmental approach focused on empathy and acceptance of you just as you are. You are the expert on your own life and your counsellor is a person who can help guide the process of counselling. A person-centred counsellor works to be their genuine self with clients to build a real connection and working relationship with you. Once you feel seen and accepted just as you are, then change and healing can happen. This approach focuses on empowering you in your healing journey, with your counsellor as a compassionate and collaborative ally.

Feminist counselling (Brown, 2018): This approach to counselling is inclusive of all genders and is based on human rights. It helps us to see how each of us are shaped and affected by the culture and society that we live in. Feminist counselling understands trauma not as an individual problem, but as a collective issue facing our whole community and culture. This approach is focused on consent, empowerment, and celebrating your strengths and resources.

Tri-phasic model of trauma counselling (Herman, 1992):

This model looks at trauma counselling as having three stages of recovery. Each of these stages has unique parts to it, and they may also overlap with each other. How you work through these stages will be unique to you and your needs.

- **Stage One: Safety and Stabilization.** In this phase, the most important thing is your safety and whether your basic needs are being met. Your counsellor may check with you about safety and risk, ask about your daily life, and check if your basic needs are being met (e.g., housing, food, sleep, etc.). This is also the part of counselling where you are getting to know your counsellor and hopefully building some sense of safety and trust. Your counsellor may work with you on self-care, coping, and self-soothing skills to help you feel prepared and better able to navigate daily life during counselling. The hope for stage one is to help you feel safe enough to move forward to stage two.
- **Stage Two: Trauma Processing (also called Remembrance and Mourning).** Once you feel safe enough in counselling, you may or may not choose to talk about some of the difficult things that have happened. It is completely possible to find healing without ever talking about the challenging experience(s). This stage of counselling is about addressing the impacts of what happened, and that can be done in many ways. Your counsellor will work with you to discover what method of addressing these impacts is a good fit for you. This may include talking about the impacts, noticing emotions, paying attention to how your body feels, using art or sand tray to express yourself, and many other options.
- **Stage Three: Reconnection.** Once you have had the chance to address the impacts of difficult experiences from the past, you may feel ready to reconnect with life. This may include reconnecting with yourself or taking care of yourself in new ways. It may include connecting to other aspects of life that feel important to you or bring you happiness and joy. You may want to connect with others, including animals or people in your life. Just as with the other two stages, this stage of reconnection will be unique for each person.



5. Understand your counsellor's approach. (continued)

The time and effort to work through these stages of recovery will be different for everyone. It is important to note that counselling at SACE is brief counselling, and you may not work through all of these stages with your SACE counsellor. You can, however, continue this work on your own after counselling or continue your counselling journey with another counsellor outside of SACE.

Somatic approaches (Resnick, 2022): Somatic means “body” and somatic approaches include your body’s knowledge and wisdom in the counselling process. Our bodies and minds are connected and our body is impacted by challenging experiences just as our minds are. It is a common result of traumatic experiences for us to feel disconnected from our body or to be afraid of some of the physical symptoms we notice. Working in a somatic way can help you create healing that includes your body. This may include noticing how your body feels when you experience an emotion (example: your stomach churns when you experience anxiety or your heart swells when you experience love). It could also include paying attention to muscles that tighten up or how your foot bounces while you talk and using this information to guide the process of counselling. Somatic approaches include Somatic Experiencing, Hakomi, Focusing, Sensorimotor Psychotherapy and more.

6. Provide feedback about your counselling experience.

You have the right to share your feedback about the counselling process. Feedback includes what you are liking, what you are not liking, and everything in between. Counselling is a collaborative process and your counsellor will want to know what is working and what could be changed to better serve you. You are the expert of your own experiences and what you need for healing, and counselling should feel safe and empowering enough to allow you to bring this inner wisdom forward. If you bring feedback to your counsellor and they do not address it, you also have the right to bring your concerns to their direct supervisor.

7. Ask questions.

- You have the right to ask for a specific method of delivery for counselling, including online or in-person. Your counsellor will collaborate with you on this decision based on your clinical needs and what they are able to offer. At SACE, we offer online counselling through secure platforms such as doxy.me and Zoom as well as in-person sessions at our office. Online counselling may not be a fit if you do not have access to a private, quiet space for sessions, if you do not have access to technology, or if your counsellor determines that there is a clinical need for in-person services (e.g., if your home is not a safe place).



7. Ask questions. (continued)

- You have the right to ask for a specific approach to counselling. In point 4 of this article, we talked about the idea of a grounding theory or theoretical orientation. A theoretical orientation is the set of assumptions and beliefs that support a counsellor's approach to counselling and provides them with a guide for the counselling interventions they use (APA, n.d.). Often, counsellors then learn different counselling modalities, such as those discussed in point 5. If you are looking for a specific approach to counselling, please share this with your counsellor early in the counselling process. If your counsellor does not offer that approach, you have the right to decide to try the approaches they do offer or to request a referral. At SACE, all our counsellors practice from an inclusive, client-centred, trauma-informed, and feminist stance.

- You have the right to ask for a referral to a different counsellor. Research consistently shows that the alliance you develop with your counsellor is one of the biggest factors correlated with positive counselling outcomes (Wampold, 2015). The therapeutic alliance is something that develops over time as you build trust with your counsellor. If after a few sessions you do not feel that your counsellor is the right fit for you, you have the right to bring this up with your counsellor and to even ask for a referral to a different counselling agency. Other reasons you may request a referral include if you are looking for a modality that your counsellor does not offer, if your counselling goals change and are no longer within your counsellor's scope of practice, or if you are looking for a counsellor who specializes in an area that your current counsellor does not. Please note that in each of these cases, we may provide a referral outside of SACE.

- You have the right to ask for personal access to your own counselling file (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2022). Your counselling file includes details about why you sought counselling, session notes, copies of all correspondence between you and your counsellor, any reports or letters written by your counsellor, and any other information relevant to your counselling journey. Your counsellor and/or their supervisor will work with you to determine the purpose of accessing your file and whether there is a potential for harm to be caused by the release of this information. They will also discuss options for access with you, such as a letter with the minimum amount of information needed to suit your needs. Please note that this section refers to your right as the client. If someone else is requesting access to your file, your counsellor will not be able to release any information without your written consent and will review risks and benefits of releasing information with you before proceeding.



7. Ask questions. (continued)

- You have the right to ask your counsellor to collaborate with other parts of your support network. Counselling can be an important part of healing from sexual violence, and we know it is not the only part. You may have a support network that includes other mental health care (e.g., psychiatrist, addictions counsellor), physical health care (e.g., medical doctor), spiritual supports (e.g., Elders), and personal supports (e.g., friends, family). At times, it may be helpful for your counsellor to coordinate care with other parts of your support network. If you would like your counsellor to connect with a member of your support network, you are welcome to ask. Your counsellor will review the risks, benefits, and purpose of this connection and together you will decide how to proceed. Your counsellor may also at times ask your permission to connect with a member of your support network. In all cases, you will be asked to provide your written consent to release information to a third party. Without your written consent, your counsellor will not be able to communicate with a member of your support network.
- You have the right to ask questions about anything and everything to do with your counselling journey. This article has outlined some of the questions you may want to ask your counsellor and some considerations for your rights as a client. If you are ever confused or curious about any part of your counselling process, please ask! Most counsellors welcome questions from their clients and set their own boundaries for what they do and do not answer. For example, counsellors have the right to choose how much personal information to disclose to a client so if you are asking them something personal, please know your counsellor may decline to answer. As a reminder, you have the right to say yes, no, maybe, I'm not sure, I don't know, or ask again later, and so does your counsellor. But if your question is about yourself and your counselling journey, chances are your counsellor will welcome your question and use it to start a deeper discussion with you.

We wish you so much gentle care as you set out on your counselling journey. If you are interested in accessing counselling services at SACE, please call us to set up an intake at **780.423.4102**.

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