

# ACA Code of Ethics Cheat Sheet (2024)

## Quick Reference for Counselors

*(Based on the ACA Code of Ethics — 2014, still current in 2024)*

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### 1. Core Ethical Principle

**Above all else: “Do no harm.”**

Every decision in counseling should prioritize:

- Client safety
- Client welfare
- Professional integrity

If unsure, choose the option that reduces risk to the client.

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### 2. Counseling Relationship (Section A)

**Key Rules:**

- Never engage in sexual or romantic relationships with clients
- Avoid dual relationships whenever possible
- Maintain clear professional boundaries
- Do not exploit clients emotionally, financially, or socially

**High-risk warning:**

Most licensing board complaints involve **boundary violations**, not clinical skill errors.

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### 3. Confidentiality (Section B)

**Must do:**

- Protect all client information

- Explain confidentiality limits clearly
- Store records securely

**You may break confidentiality only when:**

- There is risk of harm to self or others
  - Required by law or court order
  - Child/elder abuse reporting laws apply
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## 4. Informed Consent

Clients must understand:

- What therapy involves
- Risks and benefits
- Limits of confidentiality
- Treatment methods used

✓ Consent should be **written AND ongoing**

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## 5. Competence

Only practice within your:

- Training
- Education
- Supervised experience

If a case is outside your scope:

- Seek supervision
  - Refer out if needed
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## 6. Common Ethics Violations

Most reported issues include:

- Boundary crossings (dual relationships)

- Poor or missing documentation
  - Confidentiality breaches
  - Inadequate suicide risk assessment
  - Practicing outside competence
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## 7. Documentation Essentials

Your notes should clearly show:

- Clinical reasoning
- Risk assessments (especially suicide risk)
- Treatment decisions
- Coordination with other providers

👉 If it's not documented, it may be treated as “not done.”

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## 8. High-Risk Clinical Situations

Extra care required for:

- Suicidal ideation or self-harm risk
- Child or custody cases
- Substance use disorders
- Legal involvement cases

Always:

- Document thoroughly
  - Consult supervision
  - Follow standard protocols
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## 9. Supervision & Consultation

When in doubt:

- Consult a supervisor
- Document consultation
- Follow ethical decision-making models

You are not expected to handle all ethical dilemmas alone.

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## 10. Technology & Telehealth

Counselors must:

- Obtain informed consent for telehealth
  - Protect digital confidentiality
  - Avoid social media contact with clients
  - Use secure platforms for communication
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## Quick Ethical Decision Rule

When unsure, ask:

“What protects the client most?”

“What would a licensing board expect here?”

“Would I be comfortable explaining this decision in court?”

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## Final Reminder

The ACA Code of Ethics is not just a rulebook—it is a **risk management and clinical decision framework** used by licensing boards and courts.

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## Want More Support?

If you regularly face ethical gray areas in practice, [Supervision/CE Workshops/Consultation](#) can help you apply these rules confidently in real clinical situations.