

The ethics of not helping when people need help

**Ethics Café
13 March 2023**



SOPHIA TOWN
Community Psychological Services

Every person's life story matters: their joys and struggles, their hope and desperation, safety and wellbeing. This belief is captured in our organisations' mission, vision and value statements. It is also reflected in what we say when we talk about our work and why we do it.

Yet, we cannot and do not help every person who asks for or needs assistance. Such a reality stands in tension with what we perceive our duty and responsibilities to be, and what we think is morally demanded of us. We may feel frustrated, angry, helpless, and guilty because of this tension.

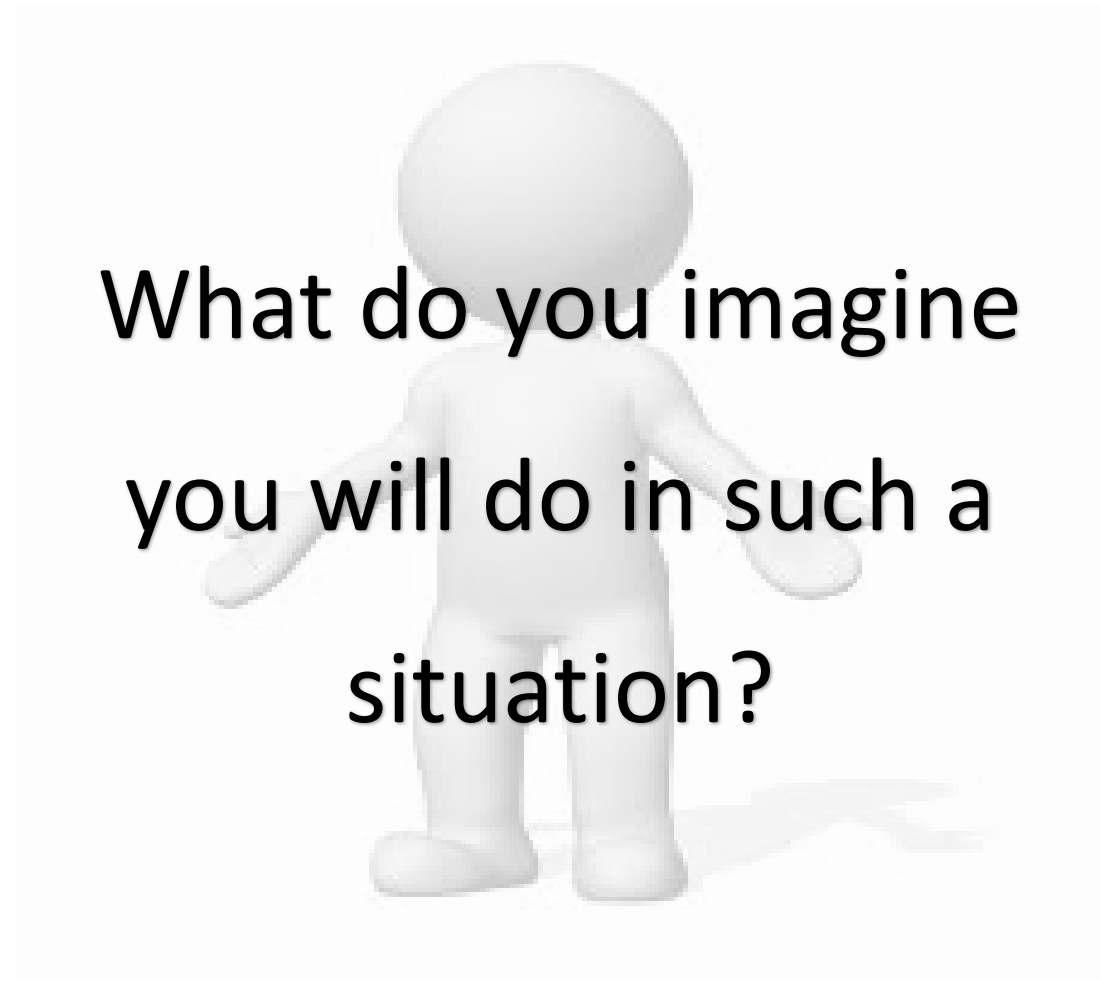
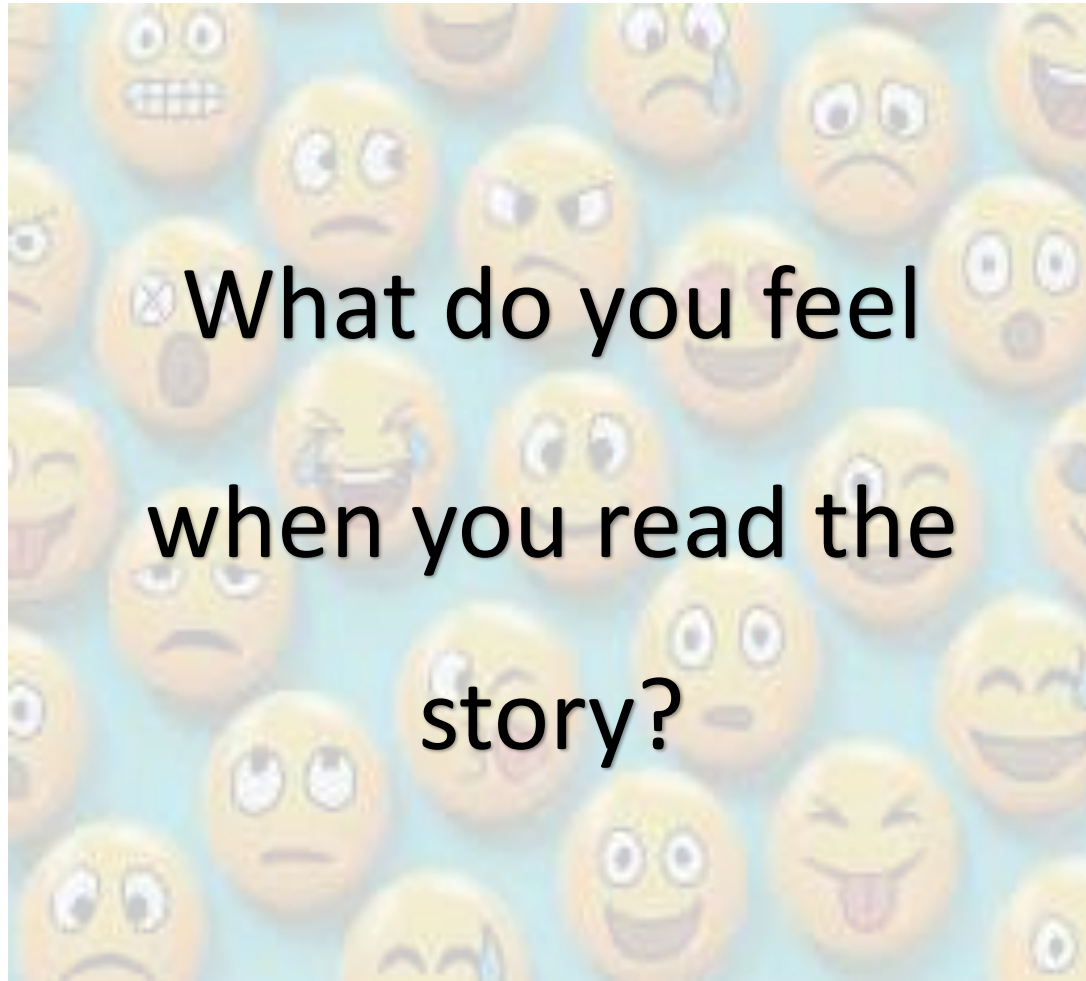
In our Ethics Café today, we will examine this tension from different perspectives and aim for each of us to explore a personal standpoint that we can justify as we navigate this ethics challenge.

Let's first think about this situation ...

Today is a happy day. You are on your way to your favourite cousin's wedding. It is finally happening! It has been a stressful time to get it all together. You have been honoured with playing a key role at the wedding. You are a bit nervous, but happy to have been asked. You are eager to be on time for this joyous occasion.

As these thoughts go through your mind, out of the corner of your eye, you notice a young child, about 5 years old, carrying a baby on his back. The child trips over rocks in the road and you see, as if in slow motion, how the baby slips from the child's back and lands on the road. Fleetinglly, you feel concerned, hoping they are not hurt. When you see the young child get up, you feel reassured. Only to be shocked by a loud cry from the child, calling for help. You look around and see that there are some other children near the distressed child, but no adults.

Individual writing reflection



Discussion in groups

What is the right thing to do
in this situation?



duty

What do we mean by 'duty'?

Moral and legal obligations ... things you have to do ... things you are responsible and accountable for ... positive and negative duties ... rules ... roles ...

Questions to discuss in your groups:

- Who/what makes the rules about duty?
- Who do I/we/our organisations have a duty to?
- What is the extent of our duty?
- Are 'good' people obliged to do more than their duty?

A bit more about duty ...

- The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) made a distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, both relating to ourselves and to others. He talks about perfect duties as those obligations we have that we have to fulfil. For example, we always have to tell the truth, and not be coercive or violent. An imperfect duty is not considered an absolute duty, and is not a rule that can be universalised. For example, helping every other person in need, or developing every aspect of one's potential (O'Neill, 1993:178).
- There is a term for acts through which we stretch ourselves beyond duty: “Supererogatory actions are extraordinary—they are performed in addition to the ordinary demands of morality” (Andrade, 2021:17). At times these acts or expectations that we have of ourselves or that others may have of us are too much of an ask, and meeting such expectations are typically not sustainable (considering typical NPO territory).

O'Neill, *Kantian Ethics*. (1991). A Companion to Ethics. Singer, Peter (ed.). Wiley-Blackwell

Andrade, Julio (2021). *Morally-Demanding Infinite Responsibility: The Supererogatory Attitude of Levinasian Normativity*. Springer Verlag

What if we do not or can not fulfil our duties?

Recognise tensions between:

Ideal world----- Imperfect reality

Intention ----- Constraints

Justice deserved ----- Randomness of justice

*Also consider relevance of ethics values, principles, character qualities indicated
on the next slide.*

Ethics *alive*: values, principles, personal qualities

Acceptance/non-judgement

Accountability

Advocacy

Belonging

Benevolence

Best interest

Care

Commitment

Compassion

Competence

Compliance (legal/rules)

Conflict on interest

Confidentiality

Consent

Consistency

Courage

Courtesy

Decency

Dependability

Dignity

Discretion

Do good

Do no harm

Dual roles

Duty

Duty to protect

Duty to warn

Equality

Freedom

Generosity

Genuineness

Goodwill

Helpfulness

Honesty

Honour

Humility

Impartiality

Individuality

Integrity

Justice

Kindness

Least harm principle

Loyalty

Open-mindedness

Professional discipline

Reliability

Resourcefulness

Respect

Responsible

Rights

Self-control

Self-determination

Selflessness

Sincerity

Solidarity

Transparency

Trustworthiness

Truthfulness

Wellness

Who is the client?

Wisdom

Everyday real-life situations in NPOs

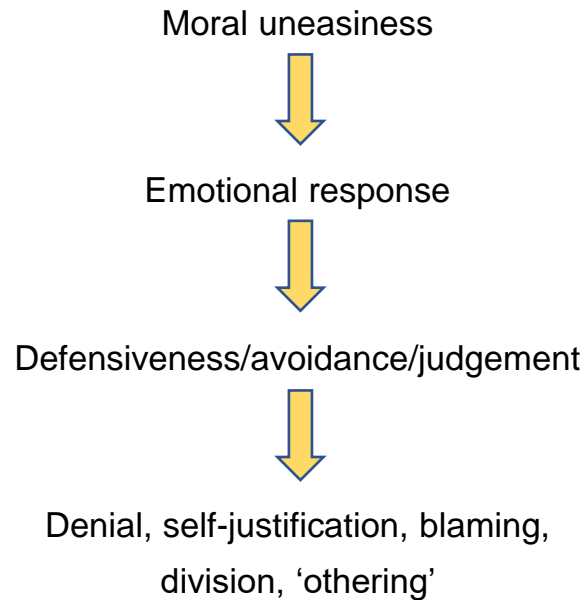
Let's go back to our introduction ...

Every person's life story matters: their joys and struggles, their hope and desperation, safety and wellbeing. This belief is captured in our organisations' mission, vision and value statements. It is also reflected in what we say when we talk about our work and why we do it.

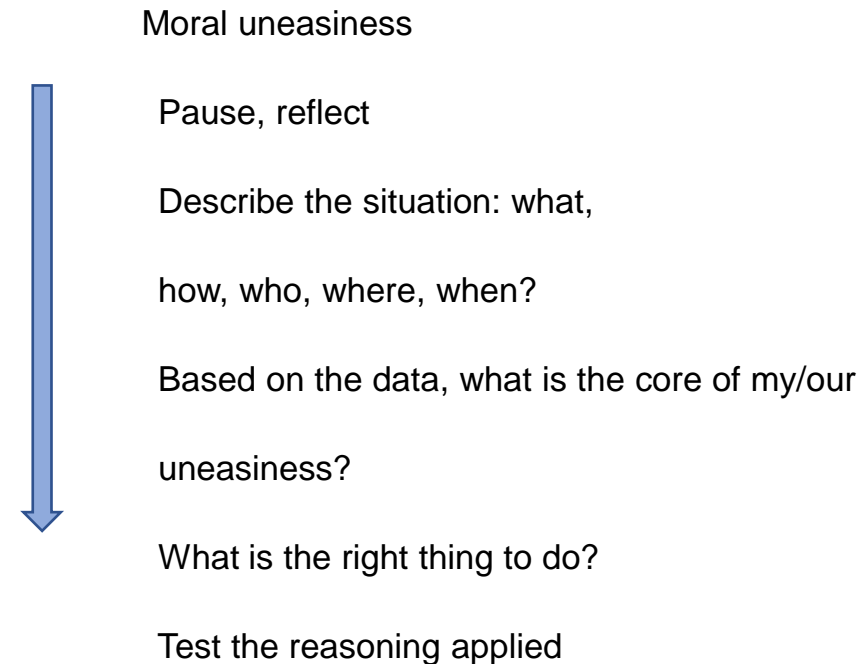
Yet, we cannot and do not help every person who asks for or needs assistance. Such a reality stands in tension with what we perceive our duty and responsibilities to be, and what we think is morally demanded of us. We may feel frustrated, angry, helpless, and guilty because of this tension.

When we feel/think upset because not everyone can be *helped* ...

Unhelpful way:



Constructive way:



Personal ethics guidelines



In our organisations' vision and mission statements, we promise *help*, it is our intention to provide services. We are resilient, innovative, and do as much as we can. But, there are more people who need services than there are services available. Or, people ask for what we do not have access to.

Group discussion:

Considering the Ethics Café discussions up until this point, how do you now think about *the ethics of not helping when people need help?*

Closing



SOPHIATOWN

COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES