**Summary: Unwritten Rules of Society**

**The Unwritten Rules of Society form part of the Protective Behaviours Process which was originally developed by Peg Flandreau-West and colleagues in Wisconsin USA in the 1970’s. Di Margetts (a Protective Behaviours Consultant from Australia)** **developed the concept of Unwritten Rules and it was incorporated into the Protective Behaviours process during the 1980’s.**

Almost all aspects of our daily lives are influenced by rules. Some are written as laws, others seem to have a power over us and yet are not actually written anywhere. For example, eating - there are rules about the way we eat, what we eat, table manners, style of cooking, who we eat with, where we eat and at what times.

These rules help guide our interactions with each other and as such are helpful. However many of these rules also seem to be contradictory, confusing and place unrealistic expectations on us. In some cases they are contrary to the very fabric of a person’s identity and experience.

These rules come from, are handed down through and are reinforced by all aspects of our society. This includes families, religious institutions, all forms of media, schools, professional training bodies… in other words our culture. Unwritten rules change over time, from place to place and may differ in each society. Behind these rules are commonly issues of power, class, racism, sexism, homophobia and any other form of prejudice or discrimination. If we choose not to abide by them we may be ostracised, labelled, shunned or sanctioned, either by ourselves in the form of guilt, or by others.

At an individual level, the result of labelling may be experienced as feeling an outsider or not belonging. A fundamental human need is to have a sense of belonging; to achieve this usually means some level of conformity to our chosen group. Thus peer and other pressures can push us into accepting unwritten rules which may be at odds with our personal beliefs and wishes.

Being told we are different may also result in loss of self-esteem and self-worth. For a few people labelling enables them to rebel and deliberately break rules. This may either create further problems or result in personal and social change. Some of the greatest artists and thinkers have broken the rules.

One easy way to recognise when an unwritten rule is lurking around or being activated is when we hear the words SHOULD, MUST, OUGHT (or ‘got to’), either in our own heads or by other people telling us what to feel, think or do. Thus our need to belong is used as a way of achieving conformity.

Unwritten rules can be both helpful and unhelpful in guiding our behaviour choices and relationships with others. It is how, when and why we use these rules which determine their value. By using the Protective Behaviours process we can decide which rules feel safe for us, at what time and for what reason.