

Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLCSW Ethics Committee and is intended as a resource for members. The issues covered in this publication have been identified by social workers as part of the NLCSW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

Will I Be Judged?

“Social workers are committed to offering the highest quality professional services to the public” (NLCSW, 2020). Part of providing high quality care is recognizing when we need to seek consultation; particularly when dealing with a complex ethical or practice dilemma. However, asking for help or admitting when we do not know something can be difficult. As professionals we do not want to be negatively judged. This edition of the Ethical Compass provides social workers with an opportunity to reflect on the concept of “judgment”, highlighting the importance of consultation, transparency, informed consent, self-reflection, and continuing education.

Peer Consultation/Supervision: “Will I look incompetent if I ask that?” “I am not sure if this is something I should report, but how will this look to my colleagues if I have to ask?” “Do other social workers experience boundary challenges with clients?” “I feel stuck in my work with a client, but how will my colleagues react if I tell them?” These are questions many of us have considered. However, admitting when we do not know something or that we need help navigating an ethical/practice dilemma is ethically responsible and a great risk management strategy. Consultations with a peer, manager, or supervisor is a key element of professional practice. As noted in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador “Social workers seek advice and the expertise of social work colleagues and colleagues from other professions in the best interest of clients” (p.8). These consultations help us to reflect on the issue, consider multiple angles, and explore options. They also help us grow as professionals. In this regard, consultation enhances continuing competency. For information pertaining to ethical considerations when engaging in consultation related to client confidentiality, consent, and documentation, please read [When in Doubt...Consult: peer consultation and ethical decision-making](#)

Informed Consent & Transparency: “Will I be negatively judged by my client if I say something is outside my level of competency and area of expertise, or I need to seek further direction?” Being open and honest with clients when one does not have all the answers, or something falls outside an area of expertise, can enhance trust in the therapeutic relationship. Having these conversations with clients is also an important part of the informed consent process and demonstrates respect for client self-determination.

Consultations with colleagues can be helpful, even if we are just looking for direction, guidance, or validation, when done in the best interest of clients.

Self-Reflection: As noted in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador, “Social workers maintain a reasonable level of self-awareness to evaluate personal factors that affect their ability to practice competently” (p. 4). There may be times when an impairment is impeding our work, we are experiencing a clash in our personal and professional values, or a client situation has triggered us in some way. Disclosing issues that are impacting our practice and seeking consultation can seem like a daunting action. *How will people react? Will people lose confidence in my ability to practice competently and safely?* However, the best interest of the client is an important guiding principle. In addition, seeking consultation and dealing with issues impacting on practice allows us to focus on our health and well-being which is important in providing essential social work services.

Continuing Education: Participating in continuing professional education to identify gaps in knowledge and learning is also part of ethical and professional social work practice. As an example, consider a social worker who has recognized a need to enhance competency to work with people from diverse cultures. In thinking about how to address this, reviewing the NLASW (2016) Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, asking clients about their culture experiences, seeking consultation from colleagues or a supervisor/manager, and engaging in relevant continuing education are options. The need to question, seek consultation and avail of opportunities for continued learning is not a professional flaw; rather, carrying on and not addressing these gaps in fear of being negatively judged is a flawed way of thinking.

This edition of the Ethical Compass addressed the concern that social workers may have about being negatively judged by colleagues and clients and highlighted the importance of consultation, transparency, and reflection. As social workers we are ultimately responsible for our own practice however, consulting in the best interest of clients can assist social workers to navigate complex issues and ethical dilemmas. This is consistent with our ethical responsibility “to maintain the best interests of clients as a priority” (CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice, p. 3). Therefore, keep asking the questions, seek clarification, consult as needed, engage in critical self-reflection, and avail of continuing professional education opportunities that expand one’s knowledge and expertise. Consulting the CASW Code of Ethics/Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and the NLCSW Standards of Practice and practice resources is also recommended. These documents can be accessed on the NLCSW website under the practice resources menu heading at www.nlcsw.ca and should become a part of our everyday social work toolkit.

References:

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