

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.

Addressing Conflicts in Values & Beliefs in Social Work Practice

Social work is a values-based profession and social workers are accountable to a Code of Ethics that outlines core professional values. Social workers practice with integrity and professionalism and ensure that clients receive the highest quality services, but what happens when values and/or beliefs conflict? This edition of Ethical Compass explores some of the issues social workers should consider when there are conflicts between one's personal beliefs and professional values, or conflict between one's professional values and the values and beliefs of a client, and will pose some reflection questions.

Conflicting Values & Beliefs: Consider the following: a social worker who does not agree with abortion feels they cannot discuss this option with a client who is seeking this information; a client is looking for information on how to inject drugs safely, but the social worker does not personally support a harm reduction philosophy; a client has been approved for medical assistance in dying (MAID) but the social worker is morally opposed to MAID; community members are upset that a social worker is providing support to a person who was convicted of sexual offenses against women.

Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of all Persons: The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics states: "Social work is founded on a long-standing commitment to respect the inherent dignity and worth of all persons" (p. 4). Stemming from this value is social work's focus on the priority of client's interests. "Social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority, with due regard to the respective interests of others" (CASW, 2005b, p. 3). Social workers keep the needs of clients at the forefront of one's decision-making, while ensuring client confidentiality. Reflection question: "Whose needs are being met through the professional relationship?"

Self-Awareness and Critical Reflection: When addressing conflicts in values and beliefs, it is important to identify the conflict, tease out the values and beliefs that are in conflict, and consider the client's priorities and best interest. As noted in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics "social workers place professional service before personal goals or advantage, and use their power and authority in disciplined and responsible ways that serve society" (p. 5). Reflection question: "What is making me uncomfortable and why?"

Client Self-Determination & Informed Consent: “Social workers promote the self-determination and autonomy of clients, actively encouraging them to make informed decisions on their own behalf” (CASW, 2005b, p. 4). In promoting self-determination, social workers engage clients in meaningful dialogue through the informed consent process on the nature of service delivery and any limitations that exist. However, it is crucial that social workers ensure they are not unduly influencing a client’s decision by imposing one’s own values and beliefs. Self-disclosure, if appropriate, should only be used in a planned and purposeful way in the best interest of the client. Reflection question: “Am I placing the client first, or am I motivated by my own needs”?

Termination of the Professional Relationship: “Social workers at the earliest opportunity inform clients of any factor, condition or pressure that affects their ability to practice adequately and competently” (CASW, 2005b, p. 10). It is important that social workers support the client’s right to self-determination, consider whether termination of the professional relationship is in keeping with the client’s interests and priorities, maintain professional boundaries, and refer to another professional to ensure continuity of care where appropriate. Reflection question: “Am I able to practice objectively and ensure that my personal values are not impacting service delivery?”

Ethical Decision-Making: It is important for social workers experiencing conflicts in values and beliefs to engage in a process of ethical decision-making. Through this process, social workers are able to identify the conflict and consider one’s ethical and professional responsibilities. The Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2021) document *Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice* is a helpful resource in thinking through the ethical complexities. A reflection on the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice is fundamental to this process. Consultation with a colleague, manager or supervisor would also be advised in thinking through the dilemma and determining how to address it. Documentation of one’s ethical decision-making is also important. Reflection question: “Am I able to make a decision that keeps the client’s interest primary and is in keeping with my professional values?”

This edition of *Ethical Compass* addressed areas for social workers to be attuned to when experiencing conflicts between one’s personal and professional values, or between their professional values and a client’s values/beliefs. Relevant sections from the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice were highlighted, along with a series of questions for reflection. It is important that social workers are aware of the ethical issues and continue to make decisions that are in the best interests of clients and in keeping with the ethics and values of the social work profession. The NLCSW website (www.nlcsw.ca) has a wealth of practice resources social workers can access when working through ethical dilemmas in practice.

References:

- CASW. (2005a). *Code of ethics*. https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/CASW_Code_of_Ethics_2005.pdf
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