



*Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.*

## Professional Judgment: The Science behind Common Sense in Social Work

{Scientific Formula:  $E^2 = EPJ$ }

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*“Ethical behaviour comes from a social worker’s individual commitment to engage in ethical practice. Both the spirit and the letter of this Code of Ethics will guide social workers as they act in good faith and with a genuine desire to make sound **judgments**” (emphasis added)  
(CASW Code of Ethics, 2005)*

*“Social Work is a multifaceted profession. As professionals, social workers are educated to exercise **judgment** (emphasis added) in the face of complex and competing interests and claims.”  
CASW Code of Ethics (2005) P.3*

*“Social workers inform clients, to the extent possible, about the disclosure of confidential information before the disclosure is made. This applies in all circumstances of disclosure, except when, in the **professional judgment** (emphasis added) of the social worker, sharing this information with the client may bring about, or exacerbate, serious harm to individuals or the public.”  
CASW Ethical Guidelines (2005) 1.5.3 p. 7*

*“Social workers who have reason to believe that a client intends to harm him/herself are expected to exercise **professional judgment** (emphasis added) regarding the need to take action consistent with their provincial/territorial legislation, standards of practice and workplace policies.”*

*CASW Ethical Guidelines (2005) 1.6.3 p. 9*

Social workers constantly encounter situations where judgment and evaluation of circumstances are required. Decisions, such as those referenced in the above excerpts, to disclose confidential information, to determine the appropriate course of action required when an individual may indicate self harm and to determine appropriate boundaries with clients are frequent across all fields of practice. When social workers consult the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice or relevant standards of practice, the requirement for professional judgment is often referenced.

Members of this profession exercise professional judgment constantly. This edition of practice matters will explore the meaning of professional judgment within the context of ethical decision-making and identify elements for consideration.

## Professional judgment

The Social Work Dictionary (2014) does not define professional judgment but defines **Professional** as “An individual who qualifies for membership in a specific profession and uses its practices, knowledge and skills to provide services...and, in so doing, always adheres to its values and codes of ethics” (p. 338). The dictionary definition of **Judgment** is *the process of forming an opinion by discerning* (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1997) Therefore, professional judgment in social work practice becomes a deliberate process occurring within a professional context guided by specific knowledge and skills.

## Education

Social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador are required to have a minimum of a bachelor of social work degree from a university accredited by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education or international equivalent and to be registered in order to use the title *social worker* or to practice within the scope of practice of the profession. This requirement provides the knowledge, skills and abilities which are the foundation for the development of professional judgment. The social work specific education is an introduction to the culture of the profession. Education enhances the skills of critical thinking: a personal competency essential for social work practice.

The requirement for continuing professional education is intended not only to increase knowledge and skills but to provide an ongoing forum to enhance professional judgment. Educational events which promote reflection and integration of knowledge are ideal for this type of learning.

The use of professional judgment in an ethical context is facilitated by seeking education and opportunities to enhance knowledge of the Code of Ethics of the profession, ethical decision-making in practice and ethics in general.

## Experience

The refinement of professional judgment comes with experience: the opportunity to put knowledge and skills into practice on a daily basis. When experience is combined with access to high quality supervision promoting reflection and discussion, judgment is refined.

Judgment is also enhanced when social workers consult with trusted colleagues who provide a balanced perspective. The learning which occurs during these consultations is invaluable. In Newfoundland and Labrador, when faced with an ethical dilemma social workers turn first to colleagues (Johns & Crockwell, 2009). Often the process of articulating a dilemma to another social worker will lead to clarity.

Consider the following two examples:

1) *During a counselling session, a client asks for a hug.*

In a matter of seconds, a social worker assesses, considers, reflects upon and decides the appropriate course of action. What are the factors that lead to this decision? If one were to consult the CASW Ethical Guidelines (2005), section 2.5.1 would state: *Social workers avoid engaging in physical contact with clients when there is a possibility of harm to the client as a result of the contact. Social workers who engage in appropriate physical contact with clients are responsible for setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries to govern such physical contact.* (p.12)

References to professional judgment in the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice do not mean that there is not a clear direction, only that there may be more than one course of action depending upon the intricacy of the circumstances.

In this situation the intricacy of circumstances may include the presenting issue for which the client is seeking services, nature of the intervention, the age and gender of the client and social worker, the context of the professional relationship, the meaning of the hug for the client and/or the social worker, the nature of the practice, personal comfort and risk tolerance. After assessing all of these factors,

some social workers will always find an alternative to hugging a client while others will state that a hug may be appropriate depending on the circumstance.

There is a risk that professional judgment can be affected by personal experiences. During times of vulnerability, social workers need to be more vigilant regarding the impact of personal circumstances upon professional judgment. For example, if the social worker is lonely or attracted to the client. Asking ourselves “would I be comfortable talking to another social worker and documenting this interaction” is a good test. Knowing when the professional and personal collide is integral to sound professional judgment.

## 2) *A client presents a social worker with a gift.*

The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005), Section 2.0, states: *It is the responsibility of the social worker to establish the tenor of their professional relationship with clients and others and to ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients (p.11)*

In resolving this ethical dilemma, the social worker would use professional judgment and make a decision that is in the best interest of the client and does not blur the professional boundary. Factors that may form part of professional judgment could include the context of the social work relationship, the nature of the work with the client, appropriateness of the gift, meaning/intent of the gift, time when the gift was presented and cultural considerations.

Both of these scenarios involve the use of knowledge of presenting issues, assessment, analysis of information presented, reflection on the range of options and ultimately deciding on a course of action. Following the decision, social workers document and consult if necessary.

## **Conclusion**

Professional judgment is a complicated formula consisting of the personal competency of critical thinking, layered with social work education, continuing professional education, experience, access to supervision, consultation, self-awareness, and reflection. It is refined and developed throughout our entire careers and can be affected by personal experiences. The Code of Ethics, Guidelines for Ethical Practice and Standards of Practice are core documents for social work which when combined with carefully developed professional judgment creates a formula for good practice.

**$E^2 = EPJ$     Education + Experience = Enhanced Professional Judgment.**

There is definitely a science behind what is all too often referred to as “common sense”!

## References

Barker, R.L. (2014) *The Social Work Dictionary* (6<sup>th</sup>ed) NASW Press: Washington

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