

Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLASW 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 NLASW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

The Ethics on Knowing One's Professional Limitations

Social workers bring extensive knowledge to their work with individuals, families, groups and communities. In providing clients with the highest quality services, social workers consider their own competency and “continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and apply new knowledge in practice commensurate with their level of education, skill and competency” (NLASW 2018 Standards of Practice, p.3). Social workers are also responsible for knowing and understanding their own professional limitations which may impact service delivery. This edition of the Ethical Compass will explore this issue through an ethical framework and highlight areas for consideration.

Informed Consent: As noted in the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice “social workers provide clients with information pertaining to their education and area of expertise and competence” (p. 4). It is important that social workers practice within their area of knowledge and expertise and be honest and transparent with clients about their qualifications and limitations. This open communication enhances trust in the therapeutic relationship and can help to mitigate issues and dilemmas that may arise.

Continuing Professional Education (CPE): The NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice notes that “Social workers are required to engage in continuing professional education as outlined in the NLASW CPE Policy” (p. 3). In terms of accessing one's CPE needs, the NLASW developed a *CPE Self Assessment Tool* that social workers can use to assess their competencies, career goals and professional knowledge. Social workers can tailor their CPE to support their current practice while engaging in new learning. This is to ensure that clients continue to receive the highest quality services based on best practices and theoretical knowledge.

Termination of the Professional Relationship: When a client issue or requested therapy falls outside the knowledge, expertise and education of the social worker and cannot be addressed in a timely manner through education and supervision, social workers explain this to clients, discuss the potential termination of the professional relationship, and with the informed consent of the client refer them to another social worker or professional with expertise and knowledge on the issue. As noted in the NLASW (2018) Standards of

Practice “social workers renegotiate or terminate professional services when the services are no longer required or no longer meet the needs of clients” (p. 13). This is in keeping with the principle of best interest of the client.

Self-Care: Professionals often put immense pressure on themselves to be all things to all people. This can result in burnout and compassion fatigue. The ability to recognize and articulate one’s own limitations is a useful self-care strategy in addressing issues that may impact on practice including boundary challenges, conflicts of interest, countertransference, moral distress, and competence.

Collegial Relationships & Interdisciplinary Practice: As noted in the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice “Social workers seek the advice and expertise of social work colleagues and colleagues from other professions in the best interest of clients” (p. 8). Knowing when to reach out to colleagues is an important aspect of professional practice and in the provision of optimal service delivery. Seeking this input with the informed consent of clients builds integrity in the professional relationship and models effective communication and problem-solving.

Peer Consultation/Supervision: Peer consultation and discussions with one’s manager can be helpful as social workers consider issues that may be impacting on their ability to provide services. This could also include impairment. As noted in the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice “Social workers maintain a reasonable level of self-awareness to evaluate personal factors that affect their ability to practice competently” (p. 4).

This edition of the Ethical Compass explored some of the ethical considerations of knowing one’s professional limitations in practice. Social workers have expertise in many areas as a result of their social work education, work experiences and engagement in continuing professional education. However, equally important to striving to enhance one’s knowledge and skills is the need to reflect on some of those limitations and developing a plan to address them in the best interest of the client. As part of this reflection, a review of the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics & Guidelines for Ethical Practice, NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice and NLASW’s ethical decision-making resource guide is also recommended.

References:

CASW. (2005). *Code of ethics*. Ottawa, ON: Author.

CASW. (2005). *Guidelines for ethical practice*. Ottawa, ON: Author.

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NLASW. (2015). *Ethical decision-making in social work practice*. St. John’s, NL: Author.

NLASW. (2015). *NLASW continuing professional education (CPE) self assessment tool*. St. John’s, NL: Author. https://nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/CPE_Self_Assessment.pdf