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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.

Preventing Ethical Drift in Social Work Practice

The concept of ethical drift is explored in professional literature (Bourke & Mincher, 2021, and Kleinman, 2006), and refers to an erosion of ethical behaviour that may go unnoticed by the professional and justified as acceptable, all the while believing the ethical standard is maintained. This edition of Ethical Compass will explore strategies in preventing ethical drift and maintaining ethical practice. A series of reflection questions will also be posed.

Practice Scenarios: 1) A client requests an intervention outside your area of competence. 2) A client asks that you not document certain information. 3) A client requests to be friends on social media. 4) Your team disagrees about a duty to report. 5) A family member asks for client information. Reflection question: What is your immediate reaction for addressing these practice issues?

Know Your Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice: A regular review of one's ethical and professional obligations as outlined in the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice and the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice is a crucial step in ensuring ethical practice. NLCSW's publication The Importance of Knowing Your Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice demonstrates the application of these regulatory documents to practice. Reflection question: What ethical values, principles and standards are guiding my practice?

Ethical Decision-Making: It is important for social workers to be mindful of ethical issues in practice and address them with diligence and transparency. NLCSW's (2021) Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice provides a model for ethical decision-making social workers can use to stay the ethical course. Following the steps outlined in the model allows one to pause and reflect on the ethical issues, consider one's gut reaction or instinct, identify areas for further consideration, and maintain an ethically oriented framework. Reflection question: Can I link my decision-making to an ethical framework?

Consultation: Regular consultation with a manager/supervisor and/or a trusted colleague, is a useful strategy for preventing ethical drift. Keeping in mind the ethical value of client confidentiality, engaging in peer consultation can help identify pertinent ethical

issues and strategies for resolving ethical issues in practice. While social workers are responsible for their own practices, one's social work peers can provide a gauge for appropriate ethical behaviour. Reflection question: Would it be reasonable for another social worker to make similar decisions or engage in similar behaviours?

Review of Practice Resources: The NLCSW has developed a wealth of practice resources that provide guidance, perspective, and clarity on ethical issues based on the code of ethics and standards of practice. These documents can be accessed at www.nlcsw.ca. Reflective question: How often do I review NLCSW practice resources?

Documentation: Reviewing one's documentation and decision-making is another useful strategy in preventing ethical drift. It is through this review that gaps and potential issues impacting on one's decision-making can be identified and addressed. As noted in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice, social workers must also "document their ethical decision-making process and decisions" (p. 11). NLCSW's Ethical Decision-Making and Documentation is a helpful resource to review. Reflection question: Does my documentation and decision-making align with my ethical duties and responsibilities?

Maintain Professional Boundaries: Many ethical issues arise when professional boundaries are challenged or crossed. In maintaining integrity in practice, social workers ensure that professional boundaries are maintained in the best interest of clients. NLCSW's The Ethics of Boundaries in Social Work Practice is a great document to review. Reflecting question: Are professional boundaries being impacted?

Self-Reflection: Social workers "need to be aware of any conflicts between personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly" (CASW, 2005a, p. 2). Through the process of self-reflection, social workers are able to determine if one's personal values, beliefs, culture, or experiences are impacting decision-making. When personal and professional values conflict, it is the professional value that should be prioritized in keeping with ethical practice. Reflection question: What personal factors are impacting my decision-making and how can I address them effectively and ethically?

This edition of Ethical Compass highlighted areas for consideration when navigating ethical issues in social work practice and preventing ethical drift. A series of reflection questions were also posed to encourage critical thought and analysis. Taking the time to reflect and consult will aid social workers in staying on an ethical course and maintaining one's ethical and professional obligations.

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