

**Transitioning from Student to
Professional Practice:
A Guideline Document for
Newly Registered Social Workers**



Introduction

You have completed your Bachelor of Social Work degree and are entering professional social work practice. For many, the transition from student to Registered Social Worker (RSW) can be quite overwhelming. You may find yourself asking: Am I prepared for this? Is this what I was expecting? Do I have the necessary training? Is it normal that I am feeling anxious? These are all natural questions and reactions, and everyone's experience through this transition is unique. While the transition process involves individual and organizational factors, there are some things that you can do to make this transition smoother. This document outlines areas and tips for newly registered social workers to reflect on through this transition to professional social work practice.

Professional Identify

Newly registered social workers are now able to use the title social worker or registered social worker, and engage in social work practice.

Tip: Regardless of your job title, identify yourself as a social worker and be proud to say that you are a social worker. RSW is your professional designation. Registration assures the public that the qualifications for practice have been met and they can expect to receive competent and ethical social work services. You are a part of a professional community, and this is empowering to reflect on in your work.

Code of Ethics & Standards of Practice

Registered social workers adhere to a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and are accountable for their practice decisions.

Tip: Keep a copy of the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice handy. Review them regularly and when dealing with an ethical or practice dilemma. It is important to be able to clearly identify one's professional and ethical responsibilities and apply them to your area of practice.

NLCSW has a wealth of practice resources that provides information, direction, and guidance for social workers on one's ethical and professional responsibilities. These resources are updated regularly and cover a broad range of topics (e.g., informed consent, client confidentiality, boundaries, conflicts of interest).

Visit the [NLCSW website](#) to access the latest Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice as well as practice resources designed to support and enhance your professional learning!

Informed Consent

Informed consent is one of the fundamental tools that social workers can use to help prevent, mitigate, or resolve ethical dilemmas in practice.

Tip: Social workers seek the informed consent of clients at the beginning of the social worker-client relationship and throughout the professional relationship as necessary. Addressing issues such as the nature of the service being provided (benefits and limits), how documentation is completed, (including how client information is disclosed), limits of confidentiality, how terminations of the professional relationship will be handled, use of social media, technology use etc., can not only be helpful as issues arise in practice, but can help prevent them in the first place. Good, informed consent is a great risk management strategy.

Documentation

Social workers have an ethical and legal responsibility to document interventions with clients. Allowing documentation to lapse or build up can result in lower job satisfaction, collegial tensions, and have a negative impact on client care.

Tip: Develop a plan to complete your documentation in a timely manner and in keeping with organizational policy and practice standards. NLCSW has a wealth of practice resources that can assist social workers in their documentation.

- Social Work Recording Explanatory Document
- Self-Assessment Tools for Informed Consent and Documentation
- Documentation Matters Series

Continuing Professional Education (CPE)

Social workers are committed to life-long learning and are required to complete continuing professional education for annual registration renewal as per NLCSW's CPE Policy.

Tip: The first year of practice can feel overwhelming. Be open to learning – you are not expected to know everything on the first day of work. Identify areas where you need more training or education and continue to embrace a culture of learning.

Early planning for the completion of one's continuing education credits is helpful. What type of CPE is of interest to you? What is your learning style? What available CPE would help you in your role? Do you need to increase your knowledge and skills in a particular therapeutic intervention or approach?

The NLCSW has a CPE assessment tool that can be used to assist you in your planning. NLCSW also offers a wealth of continuing professional education webinars that you can access at your convenience which can be found on the NLCSW YouTube Channel.

The Update My CPE feature, which you can access through MyNLCSW, is a valuable tool that you can use to track, and record completed CPE throughout the registration year. Then during registration renewal, you don't need to go looking for what CPE was completed as it is readily available at your fingertips and can be transferred to your renewal application with the click of a button. This feature is efficient and a real time saver.

Boundaries

Social workers are responsible for setting clear and appropriate boundaries with clients. Boundaries allows for a safe connection between social workers and clients and ensures that the client's interests remain primary. Maintaining professional boundaries can also help to mitigate ethical dilemmas in practice.

Tip: Address boundary challenges in a proactive manner and engage clients in open and transparent conversations (e.g., letting clients know that you do not accept friend requests on social media, explaining to clients why personal friendships are not acceptable).

Peer Consultation/Supervision

Consultations with a peer, manager, or supervisor is a key element of professional practice.

Tip: Engaging in consultations with a supervisor or colleague can help social workers reflect on complex ethical issues and practice considerations in providing clients with high-quality social work services. These consultations are also important in terms of professional self-growth and enhancing competency in practice. Importantly, while consultations can provide direction or guidance, they can also provide validation and foster confidence in professional decision-making.

Maintain & Build Professional Connections

Support from one's colleagues is a significant factor in transitioning to social work practice.

Tip: The collegial relationships that you fostered in your BSW education can be a great source of support as you transition to professional practice. While everyone's experience may be different through the transition, many of the same emotions and feelings are expressed. Your work colleagues are also a great source of support.

Self-Care

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to engage in self-care and address issues impacting on their ability to practice ethically and competently. Vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout can be experienced by social workers and early intervention is important.

Tip: Take steps to ensure that you have a good work-life balance. This is important to your overall health and well-being. Talk to your manager or supervisor if you are having difficulty coping with work demands and seek assistance if you are experiencing issues that are impacting on your social work practice.

Professional Liability Insurance

Professional liability insurance provides social workers with insurance protection when claims that arise out of the delivery of professional services are filed against them (e.g., actual or alleged injuries, negligent acts, errors, or omissions).

Tip: Social workers are able to obtain professional liability insurance through the CASW Liability Insurance Program. Administered through BMS, professional liability insurance coverage is focused on the individual social worker and is not connected to one's employer. Information about CASW's Liability Insurance Program can be accessed at <http://www.casw.bmsgroup.com/>.

Conclusion

While new social workers generally receive workplace orientation, the transition to professional practice does evolve over time with experience, supervision, mentorship, and continuing professional development. The tips outlined in this document are meant to assist newly registered social workers as they successfully make the transition to employment and practice.