



# Resolving & Avoiding Ethical Dilemmas

Peggy Reed-Lohmeyer, MSW, LCSW  
Kaleidoscope Consulting Services, LLC

---

# Objectives

1. Identify common ethical issues faced by social workers
2. Identify strategies to effectively deal with common ethical issues
3. Identify strategies to lessen ethical concerns arising in the future

# Introductions

- Please share
  - Your name
  - Employer/agency

# Why have professional ethics?

What's their point?

# Social Work Ethics

- Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers
  - Guides practice & decision making
  - Provides some consistency across profession
  - Distinguishes our profession from others
- Professional obligation of all social workers
- Legal obligation of all Missouri licensed social workers—at all levels

# Purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics

- The Code identifies core values on which social work's mission is based.
- The Code summarizes broad ethical principles that reflect the profession's core values and establishes a set of specific ethical standards that should be used to guide social work practice.
- The Code is designed to help social workers identify relevant considerations when professional obligations conflict or ethical uncertainties arise.

# Purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics continued

- The *Code* provides ethical standards to which the general public can hold the social work profession accountable.
- The *Code* socializes practitioners new to the field to social work's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards.

# Purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics continued

- The Code articulates standards that the social work profession itself can use to assess whether social workers have engaged in unethical conduct. NASW has formal procedures to adjudicate ethics complaints filed against its members.\* In subscribing to this Code, social workers are required to cooperate in its implementation, participate in NASW adjudication proceedings, and abide by any NASW disciplinary rulings or sanctions based on it.



# What Ethical Dilemmas Do You Face Most Often?

Attendee participation

# Objective #1

Identify common ethical issues faced by social workers.

# Common Ethical Dilemmas

- Right to Self-Determination
- Confidentiality
- Differences in Morals/Personal Beliefs
- Receiving Gifts
- Dual relationships

# Common Ethical Dilemmas cont

- Involuntary Commitment
- Commission of Illegal Acts
- Interaction on Social Media
- Obligations to Minors & Breaching their Confidentiality
- Other Dilemmas

# Most Frequent Substantiated NASW Code of Ethics Violations

- 1.01 – Commitment to Clients
- 1.06 – Conflicts of Interest
- 1.07 – Privacy and Confidentiality
- 1.09 – Sexual Relationships
- 2.11 – Unethical Conduct of Colleagues
- 3.04 – Client Records
- 4.04 – Dishonesty, Fraud, and Deception
- 4.06 – Misrepresentation

# Most Frequent Ethical Issues before the *Missouri State Board*

- Boundary issues/dual relationships
- Failure to document properly

## Objective #2

Identify strategies to effectively deal with common ethical issues.

# ETHIC Model of Decision Making

- E Examine relevant values
- T Think about the code & relevant laws
- H Hypothesize about possible consequences
- I Identify who will benefit & be harmed
- C Consult with supervisor & colleagues



- Identify social work values separate from personal values
- Examine client values
- Societal values may be relevant
- Consider agency values

## **E** Examine relevant personal, societal, agency, client & professional values

Examine relevant values

## NASW Code of Ethics

- Six sections of social worker's responsibility to
  1. Client
  2. Colleagues
  3. Practice settings
  4. Professionals
  5. The profession
  6. The broader society

**T**  
Think about what ethical standard of the NASW code of ethics applies, as well as relevant laws & case decisions

Think about code & relevant laws

- Consider different scenarios of impact or decision
- List pros & cons of each potential scenario
- Examine possible results of each

## H Hypothesize about possible consequences of different decisions

Hypothesize about possible outcomes

- Sometimes have to decide between two bad alternatives
- Concern for most vulnerable is a hallmark of our profession

| Identify who will benefit & who will be harmed in view of social work's commitment to the most vulnerable

Identify who will benefit & be harmed

- Others may suggest alternatives or present new information
- Should use supervisor as a first resource in ethical decision making
- Ethics committees can be helpful

## C Consult with supervisors & colleagues about the most ethical choice

Consult with supervisors & colleagues

# Scenarios

Ethic case examples

# Scenario Exercise

- Discuss within your pair/group the scenario you are given, applying the ETHIC model, & determine what the best course of action is
- After all groups are finished, share about your scenario with the group as a whole
  - Share on the process & any ethical struggles or new considerations

## Objective #3

Identify strategies to lessen ethical concerns arising in the future.



# Avoiding Ethical Pitfalls

- Protect confidentiality
  - Discuss limits of confidentiality
  - Ensure safe storage of confidential records
  - Know federal & state laws
  - Obey mandatory reporting laws
- Respect autonomy & self-determination
- Know your supervisory responsibilities

# Avoiding Ethical Pitfalls cont.

- Identify your client & role
- Document
- Practice within scope of expertise
- Know the difference between abandonment & termination
- Understand what constitutes a dual relationship

# Views on Dual Relationships

- Should avoid dual relationships at all costs
- Dual relationships are situationally & contextually determined
- Being too dogmatic diminishes the essence & authenticity of social work practice

# Dual Relationships

## **Absolutist**

- Believe certain actions are ethically right or wrong & that certain values should always determine moral course of action

## **Relativist**

- Believe that moral standards are personal, subjective, & situational
- Morality of a decision is measured by the goodness of the outcome

# Dual Relationships

## **Always Wrong**

- Dating
- Bartering
- Business arrangements

## **Maybe Acceptable**

- Social events in rural settings
- Attending funeral of hospice patient
- Providing service in only professional available

# Deciding about entering into a Dual Relationship

- How will the dual relationship change the power differential or take advantage of the power differential in the therapeutic relationship?
- How long will the dual relationship last?
- How will ending one relationship affect the other relationship?
- How much will objectivity be impacted?
- What is the risk of exploitation?

# Additional Scenarios

- If time allows

# Questions & Comments

Let's hear from you



# Contact Information

Peggy Reed-Lohmeyer, MSW, LCSW  
Kaleidoscope Consulting Services, LLC  
peggy.reed-lohmeyer.msw.lcsw@hotmail.com  
573/550-8426



**Kaleidoscope**  
Consulting Services, LLC

# References

- Allen, K. (n.d.) What is an Ethical Dilemma? <https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/ethics-articles/What-Is-an-Ethical-Dilemma%3f/>
- Brescia University. (2016, July). Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work. <https://www.brescia.edu/2016/07/ethical-dilemmas-in-social-work/>
- Congress, Elaine P. (2000 Spring). What Social Workers Should Know About Ethics: Understanding and Resolving Practice Dilemmas. *Advances in Social Work*. 1(1).
- Dewane, Claudia. (2010 Jan/Feb). Respecting Boundaries-The Don'ts of Dual Relationships. *Social Work Today*. 10(1). <http://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/012610p18.shtml>
- Gleeson, P. (2018, June) A List of Ethical Dilemmas Facing Social Work. <http://work.chron.com/list-ethical-dilemmas-facing-social-work-21946.html>
- Marty, T. (2020, Jan.) Personal email communication.
- Miller, Ashley. (n.d.) A List of Ethical Dilemmas Facing Social Worker. Demand Media. Retrieved in 2015, from <http://work.chron.com/list-ethical-dilemmas-facing-social-work-21946.html>
- MSW Guide. (n.d.) Social Work Ethics: 5 Common Dilemmas & How to Handle Them Responsibly. <https://www.mswguide.org/blog/social-work-ethics/>
- National Association of Social Workers. (2018-a). Professional Review. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Professional-Review>
- National Association of Social Workers (NASW). (n.d-b). Read the Code of Ethics: Purposes of the NASW Code of Ethics. <https://www.socialworkers.org/about/ethics/code-of-ethics/code-of-ethics-english>