

Ethical Decision Making Guide

As social workers we often face situations, which require sound ethical decision making skills. Determining the appropriate course to take when faced with a difficult ethical dilemma can be a challenge. To assist me in meeting this challenge, I have developed this ethical decision making guide as a guide for making sound ethical decisions.

1) Define the specific ethical issue/conflict.

- Gather as much information as I can that will illuminate the situation. In doing so, it is important to be as specific and objective as possible.
- Write ideas on paper to help gain clarity.
- Outline the facts, separating out innuendos, assumptions, hypotheses, or suspicions.
- Ask questions such as “Is it an ethical, legal, professional, or clinical problem”. Is it a combination of more than one of these?
- Identify internal/external factors (e.g., legal, political, social, economic) that may influence the decision.
- Identify key values
- Identify the parties who will be affected by the decision.

2) Generate potential courses of action.

- Brainstorm as many possible courses of action as possible. Be creative and consider all options. If possible, enlist the assistance of a colleague to help generate options.

3) Consider the potential consequences of all options and determine a course of action.

- Evaluate each option and assess the potential consequences for all parties involved. Eliminate the options that clearly do not give the desired results or cause even more problematic consequences. Review the remaining options to determine which option or combination of options best fits the situation and addresses the priorities I have identified.

4) Evaluate the selected course of action.

- Review the selected course of action to see if it presents any new ethical considerations. Apply Stadler three-prong test at this time.
 - a. Justice-assess my own sense of fairness by determining whether I would treat others the same in this situation.
 - b. Publicity- Ask myself whether I would want y behavior reported in the press.
 - c. Universality- Assess whether I could recommend the same course of action to another counselor in the same situation.

5) Select ethical principals from the NASW Code of Ethics, to guide the decision-making process.

6) Implement the course of action.

- Taking the appropriate action in an ethical dilemma is often difficult. After implementing my course of action, follow up on the situation to assess whether my actions had the anticipated effect and consequences.