

# 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 of Balancing Quality of Life and Autonomy/Freedom

Social workers support and promote the self-determination of clients, and encourage clients to make informed decisions. However, there are times when social workers struggle when they see clients making decisions they perceive to be “risky” or “poor” and not in the client’s best interest. This edition of Ethical Compass will highlight some of the ethical issues social workers may consider when faced with these dilemmas in practice.

*Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons:* In their work to promote and advocate for the health and well-being of individuals and families, social workers aim to ensure that people have access to the services and supports they need to enjoy a high quality of life. Yet, quality of life is subjective and is defined by each individual client. As noted in the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2005), “social workers uphold each person’s right to self-determination, consistent with that person’s capacity and with the rights of others” (p. 4). Capacity is a key element, and social workers bring essential skills and expertise in assessing capacity and articulating the role of capacity in decision-making. This is something that social workers should consider when balancing quality of life and autonomy/freedom. Social workers must also be aware of their legislative responsibilities to intervene in situations where there is a risk of harm to self or others (i.e., the Adult Protection Act) where appropriate.

*Informed Consent:* “Social workers respect the client’s right to make choices based on voluntary, informed consent” (CASW Code of Ethics, 2005, p. 4). As part of the informed consent process, social workers continuously strive to ensure that individuals have all the information they need to make informed decisions, that they understand the information, and can appreciate the risks and benefits of their decisions. When clients are seen to be making “risky” or “poor” decisions, social workers can provide clients with information about their options and programs and services the client may consider.

*Risk Tolerance:* When resolving ethical dilemmas in practice, risk tolerance is an important concept to explore. As noted in the NLASW document “Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice” (2015) “Risk tolerance can be defined as one’s comfort level with risk. This includes risk for oneself and on behalf of another (e.g. clients) to achieve a goal or purpose” (p.2). In exploring risk tolerance, social workers might consider the following questions: “How does my risk tolerance match with the client’s perception of risk?” “With the expectations from the clients’ family or the broader community?” “When does risk become a factor in limiting someone’s right to self-determination?”

*Self-Reflection:* Social workers are encouraged to continuously reflect on their own biases, values and beliefs and how these may be impacting on their work with clients. When faced with dilemmas where a client is perceived to be making “risky” or “poor” decisions that will impact their quality of life, social workers need to step back and question their own thinking and beliefs. The following questions might be helpful: “How do I view quality of life and by whose standards?” “Am I inadvertently trying to impose my own values on the client?” “How is this being perceived by the client? Are their times when I am being paternalistic?”

*Cultural Competence:* As noted in the NLASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (2016), it is “important that social workers acquire, or know how to acquire cultural knowledge relevant to the client” (p.8). How does the client perceive their quality of life and their psychosocial needs? What are some of the cultural considerations that need to be considered? How does the client view health and well-being? What is the client’s conceptualization of the issue that is concerning you as a social worker? These are important questions to consider.

As social workers, there will be times in our work where we will question a client’s decision that we feel negatively impact their quality of life. Social workers use professional judgement in navigating these issues in practice, are informed about their legislative responsibilities, and consider the ethical issues highlighted in this edition of the *Ethical Compass*.

#### References:

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers. (2016). *Standards for cultural competence in social work practice*. [http://www.nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Cultural\\_Compentency\\_Standards\\_2\\_1.pdf](http://www.nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Cultural_Compentency_Standards_2_1.pdf)

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Canadian Association of Social Workers. (2005). *Code of ethics*. <http://www.nlasw.ca/practice-resources/code-of-ethics>