**Social Work Code of Ethics**

The social work Code of Ethics ensures social workers adhere to values, principles, and standards that benefit society and social work practice as a whole.

Social workers are not only highly skilled, but they are also value-driven. When licensed clinical social workers face complex ethical dilemmas, the social work Code of Ethics is the first resource they consult.

Read on for our primer on the social work Code of Ethics and how it can help you become a better social worker.

**What Is the Social Work Code of Ethics?**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics guides social workers' conduct. It consists of four parts: a preamble, a statement of purpose, the Code's Six Guiding Principles, and standards of conduct.

The Code of Ethics was first written in 1960 and is updated nearly every year. The 2021 revision to the code emphasizes the importance of professional self-care in social work so practitioners can properly assist their clients while taking preventative care of themselves to avoid compassion fatigue.

**Why Is the Code of Ethics Important?**

The purpose of the social work Code of Ethics is to set consistent values, principles, and standards of conduct for all in the profession of social work. The code models how social work should be conducted in order to help disadvantaged, marginalized, and disabled people reach their full potential.

Upholding the Code of Ethics means upholding its values and behaving in a way that honors ethical concerns like informed consent, cultural competence, and appropriate patient-provider relationships.

All social workers, including those with niche job titles — e.g., forensic, medical, and psychiatric social workers — need to adhere to the Code of Ethics. Failing to follow the code and its social work values can result in loss of job or revocation of one's social work license.

**Six Core Social Work Values**

The NASW's core values set ideals that should inform social work practice for all. Social workers need to commit themselves to the NASW's six core values: service, social justice, the dignity and worth of each person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

**1. Service**

Social workers enact the value of service by helping others. When social workers take on assignments that aid others but lead to little financial compensation or personal prestige, they are committing to service. Social workers may choose to do pro-bono work or accept low earnings as a reflection of their commitment to empowering humanity.

**2. Social Justice**

Social workers show their commitment to social justice by advocating for marginalized groups and educating others about discrimination, poverty, unemployment, and all other forms of injustice. Social workers need to show sensitivity to racial, cultural, ethnic, and religious issues tied to oppression and injustice through their actions as well as through their words.

**3. Dignity and Worth of the Person**

Social workers recognize the uniqueness and worth of each client. They treat clients with respect and dignity while recognizing the individual value every individual brings to the world. Social workers help clients integrate into society in ways that respect their inherent worth and individuality while also empowering them to achieve their stated goals.

**4. Importance of Human Relationships**

In order to effect positive change in the life of clients, social workers value relationships that give their clients meaning and purpose. Social workers connect clients with community resources and/or supports to help them recover, so performing this task strengthens not only the clients' emotional lives, but also the lives of the family, friends, and acquaintances who support them.

**5. Integrity**

Social workers embrace honesty and responsibility in their actions, providing an example for future professionals. They also respect the value of self-care and know when personal difficulties might infringe on their ability to be effective in their work.

**6. Competence**

Social workers display a commitment to continuing education and training. They are committed to keeping their skill set sharp and attuned to contemporary issues. Ultimately, social workers strive to make meaningful contributions to the field's knowledge base.

**Major Points from the Social Work Code of Ethics**

The code is composed of thematic sections that outline a social worker’s responsibility to clients, colleagues, employers, and the profession in general. Following is a summary of some of the major points from a few of the sections.

**Conduct**

Social workers must:

Maintain high standards of personal conduct.

Aim to maintain a high degree of professionalism throughout their careers.

Hold service to be the most important element of social work.

Maintain a high level of professional integrity.

Engage in lifelong learning to maintain competence.

Guide practice according to scholarly inquiry and use evidence to inform best practices.

**Responsibility to Clients**

Social workers must:

Make clients their primary responsibility.

Foster maximum self-determination in clients.

Respect the privacy of clients and keep information that has been shared during the course of their duties confidential.

Charge fees for services that are fair and considerate to clients.

**Responsibility to Colleagues and Employers**

Social workers should:

Treat colleagues with respect, fairness, and courtesy.

Adhere to professional obligations as determined by their employers.

**Responsibility to the Social Work Profession**

Social workers should:

Uphold, represent, and advance the values of the social work profession.

Help the profession make social services available to the general public.

Educate themselves to become culturally competent and understanding of diversity.

At its most basic level, social work is about promoting the general welfare of society by representing those who are most vulnerable. Providing social services can sometimes be a difficult task, wrought with ethical uncertainties and challenges. The Social Work Code of Ethics helps social workers navigate these challenges throughout their careers and provides a framework for the principles and standards that they must uphold.