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# *Ethics for Social Work: Establishing Boundaries*



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## Overview

National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics

Definition of professional boundaries

Importance of professional boundaries

Common lapses

Suggestions on maintaining professional boundaries

Your role as social worker

## Code of Ethics

NASW maintains a code of ethics.

Last updated in 2021.

A set of standards that guide the professional conduct of social workers.

## Code of Ethics

2021 Update:

Includes language that addresses importance of self-care.

Provides more explicit guidance regarding cultural competence.

## Code of Ethics

Four major sections:

Preamble

Purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics

Ethical principles

Ethical standards

## Code of Ethics: Preamble

Primary mission of social work profession:

“...enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.”

## Code of Ethics: Preamble

## Six Core Values

## Six Core Values

Service

Social justice

Dignity and worth of the person

Importance of human relationships

Integrity

Competence

## Code of Ethics: Purpose

Professional ethics are at the core of social work  
Six Primary Purposes

## Six Primary Purposes

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 practices.

## Code of Ethics: Purpose

The Code is designed to help social workers identify relevant considerations when professional obligations conflict or ethical uncertainties arise.

The Code provides ethical standards to which the general public can hold the social work profession accountable.

## Code of Ethics: Purpose

The Code socializes practitioners new to the field to social work's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards, and encourages all social workers to engage in self-care, ongoing education, and other activities to ensure their commitment to those same core features of the profession.

## Code of Ethics: Purpose

The Code articulates standards that the social work profession itself can use to assess whether social workers have engaged in unethical conduct.

## Code of Ethics: Purpose

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.

## Code of Ethics: Ethical Principles

Six Ethical Principles Based on Six Core Values



## Value: Service

Ethical Principle: Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.

Social workers elevate service to others above self-interest.

Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems.

Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service).

## Value: Social Justice

Ethical principle: Social workers challenge social injustice

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.

Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice.

## Value: Social Justice

Ethical principle: Social workers challenge social injustice  
These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity.

Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

## Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person

Ethical principle: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.

Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.

## Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person

Ethical principle: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.

Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination.

Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs.

## Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person

Ethical principle: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.

Social workers are cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society.

They seek to resolve conflicts between clients' interests and the broader society's interests in a socially responsible manner consistent with the values, ethical principles, and ethical standards of the profession.

## Value: Importance of Human Relationships

Ethical principle: Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.

Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change.

Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process.

## Value: Importance of Human Relationships

Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

## Value: Integrity

Ethical principle: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.

Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them.

## Value: Integrity

Ethical principle: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.

Social workers should take measures to care for themselves professionally and personally.

Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

## Value: Competence

Ethical Principle: Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice.

## Value: Competence

Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

## What are Professional Boundaries?

Professional boundaries are a set of guidelines, expectations and rules which set the ethical and technical standards in the social care environment.

They set limits for safe, acceptable and effective behavior by worker.

Cooper, 2012

## Maintaining Boundaries

Several sections of Code of Ethics relevant to maintaining boundaries:

Conflicts of interest

Sexual relationships

Physical contact

## Maintaining Boundaries

Several sections of Code of Ethics relevant to maintaining boundaries:

Payment for services

Supervision and consultation

Education and training

## Conflicts of Interest

“Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client. In instances when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries...”



## Conflicts of Interest

...(Dual or multiple relationships occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social, or business.) Dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively.”

## Sexual Relationships

“Social workers should under no circumstances engage in sexual activities or sexual contact with current clients, whether such contact is consensual or forced.”

## Sexual Relationships

“Social workers should not engage in sexual activities or sexual contact with clients’ relatives or other individuals with whom clients maintain a close personal relationship when there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client...”

## Sexual Relationships

Sexual activity or sexual contact with clients’ relatives or other individuals with whom clients maintain a personal relationship has the potential to be harmful to the client and may make it difficult for the social worker and client to maintain appropriate professional boundaries.

## Sexual Relationships

Social workers—not their clients, their clients’ relatives, or other individuals with whom the client maintains a personal relationship—assume the full burden for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries.”

## Sexual Relationships

“Social workers should not provide clinical services to individuals with whom they have had a prior sexual relationship. Providing clinical services to a former sexual partner has the potential to be harmful to the individual and is likely to make it difficult for the social worker and individual to maintain appropriate professional boundaries.”

## Physical Contact

“Social workers should not engage in physical contact with clients when there is a possibility of psychological harm to the client as a result of the contact (such as cradling or caressing clients). Social workers who engage in appropriate physical contact with clients are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries that govern such physical contact.”

## Payment for Services

“Social workers should avoid accepting goods or services from clients as payment for professional services. Bartering arrangements, particularly involving services, create the potential for conflicts of interest, exploitation, and inappropriate boundaries in social workers’ relationships with clients.”

## Supervision and Consultation

“Social workers who provide supervision or consultation are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries.”

## Education and Training

“Social workers who function as educators or field instructors for students should not engage in any dual or multiple relationships with students in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the student. Social work educators and field instructors are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries.”

## Importance of Professional Boundaries

Delicate balance between building a trusting, open relationship with client and “going too far” in the worker-client relationship.

## Importance of Professional Boundaries

Establishing, maintaining boundaries essential to:

Protect social workers, clients and organizations that employ SWs.

Avoid emotional stress.

Facilitate a safe, open, stable, transparent relationship based on client’s needs.

Marc et al., 2019

## Risk Factors for Overstepping Boundaries

The social worker identifies with clients' issues.

Strong feelings, emotions (caused in the social worker by the story of the client).

Personal issues, fatigue/stress, overworked.

## Risk Factors for Overstepping Boundaries

Frustrated/difficult clients.

Likeable clients (if the social worker relaxes too much and assumes everything will be easy).

Cooper, 2012

## Risk Factors for Overstepping Boundaries

Attractive clients

Manipulative clients

Accidental meeting with client, outside of work

Non-standard work environment

Signs of attachment/dependence on the part of the client

Cooper, 2012

## Maintaining a Balance to Keep Boundaries

A continuum from entanglement to rigid:

Entanglement

Overinvolvement, meeting own emotional, social, physical needs

Balance



## Maintaining a Balance to Keep Boundaries

Maintain boundaries, use judgement and self-reflection, decisions accountable to other professionals.

Rigid

Inflexible, do not attend to the needs of the client.

Davidson, 2005; Marc et al., 2019

## Entanglement Cues

Your neutrality is progressively diminishing.

You reveal information about other clients to this client.

You reveal information about yourself unrestrainedly.

You are extraordinarily angered or saddened with this particular client's choices.

Davidson, 2007

## Entanglement Cues

You have intruding thoughts about this client when you are not at work.

You are unusually invested in changing a client's behavior.

You promote a client's dependence on you.

You encourage a client to separate themselves from healthy support systems.

Davidson, 2007

## Entanglement Cues

You spend more time with a particular client than usual, in person or on the telephone.

You meet with a client at the end of day to enable you to extend your time with her/him.

You meet in uncommon places, or in a client's home when it is not necessary to be there.

You are over-permissive with fees.

Davidson, 2007

## Entanglement Cues

You exchange gifts.

You contrast the satisfying qualities of a client with your spouse/partner's less satisfying qualities.

You daydream about a client.

You long for this client's next visit.

You plan your attire based on your appointment.

Davidson, 2007

## Entanglement Cues

You direct a client in their particular day-to-day details of life.

You present yourself as the expert on a client's life choices.

You disapprove of a client's assertive behavior.

You act or feel jealous about a client.

You are defensive when probed.

Physical contact begins.

Davidson, 2007

## Rigid Cues

You reveal nothing about yourself to a client.

You feel detached from or do not care about a client.

You are unjustifiably pessimistic at work.

Davidson, 2007

## Rigid Cues

You continue to employ strategies that have been clearly ineffective.

You are loath to go to work.

You are overly intellectual about a client's problems.

You present yourself as the expert on a client's life choices.

Davidson, 2007

## Rigid Cues

You are punishing, callous, prejudiced or critical toward a client.

You use patronizing or derogatory terminology when referring to a client.

You terminate a visit/conversation in the midst of a client's expression of unresolved emotions because the original time set for the meeting is about to lapse.

Davidson, 2007

## Rigid Cues

You minimize the degree of pain a client has experienced.

You are disinclined to exhibit any type of emotion.

You feel impatient, irritated, or emotionally absent with a client.

You refuse to offer help to meet a client's needs.

Davidson, 2007

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Examine motivations for devoting extra time and attention to a given client.

Though some clients require more time/energy than others, treating a client differently might be a cue of boundary pushing.

NASW, 2011

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Assess whether your services are:

- 1) congruent with the client's care plan,
- 2) your job description,
- 3) your professional scope of practice, and
- 4) your organization's mission

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Consistently apply your organization's process for communicating with clients.

Can include emails, voicemail, cell phones, off-hour referrals to 911, emergency rooms, crisis centers.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

You might think you are helping a client by saying (for example) to contact them during a crisis, but eventually you won't be available.

The client might lose trust/be reluctant to seek help in other ways.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Exceeding professional boundaries with clients sets up your colleagues, organization for failure.

Going beyond parameters of service system/role creates unfair expectation for coworkers to do the same.

Inconsistent professional boundaries within teams and organizations may confuse clients and erode their confidence in your organization.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Be discriminate in your use of social media.

e.g., avoid friending people on Facebook, limit amount of information about yourself, friends that are online.



## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Controversial if you should try to use the internet to get information about clients online.

Posting negative things about your workplace may demonstrate lack of respect for coworkers and violate NASW Code of Ethics.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Develop strong working relationships with your colleagues.

Coworkers may or may not be friends, but friendly workplace alliances can be helpful in coping with stress of social work practice, maintaining sense of humor.

Trusted colleagues can help you think through boundary-related questions.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Use supervision and consultation to help you determine appropriate professional boundaries in challenging situations.

Maintain an ongoing dialogue with your supervisor about workload.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Use tools like assessment forms, NASW standards of practice, to communicate to your clients' needs and the ways in which you spend your time on the job.

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Use tools like assessment forms, NASW standards of practice, to communicate to your clients' needs and the ways in which you spend your time on the job.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

If systems to address client needs do not exist within your organization—or if clients repeatedly experience difficulty in accessing services— collaborate with your supervisor or administrator to address the problem, rather than trying to fill those gaps singlehandedly.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Be attuned to workplace bullying.

You deserve the same respect and dignity in your work environment that you offer to your clients and colleagues.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Find ways to nurture yourself throughout your workday and during your commute.

Take regular lunch breaks – away from desk, car, or otherwise apart from work responsibilities.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Find ways to change pace on occasion during the day: stand and stretch if you sit at a desk, listen to music, audio book, podcast, etc. while driving to client/during commute, take a brief walk, breathe deeply and consciously for a minute.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Take time away from your job to rejuvenate.

Strive to maintain a regular work schedule and avoid working overtime on a routine basis.

Determine (with your boss as necessary) if you need to be available off the job.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Clear expectations are particularly important if email/other work-related communications come to your smart phone.

Don't confuse professional responsiveness/responsibility with being accessible to colleagues/clients 24/7.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Devote time off the job to activities that nurture you.

Spending time with family/friends, reading, watching a movie, singing, journaling, meditating, exercising, etc. can re-energize you to return to work.

Allow time for rest.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Be attuned to the ways in which you absorb work stresses/take steps to manage that stress.

Even SW with strong external boundaries (e.g., regular work schedule) may “take work home” on an emotional level.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Writing about your feelings or talking with someone you trust can help you process the impact of work on your life.

Maintain clear internal boundaries between your professional and personal lives.

## Tips for Maintaining Professional Boundaries

If you find yourself struggling consistently to maintain professional boundaries, consider seeking support from a licensed mental health professional to understand your behavior and evaluate the sustainability of your current role or work environment.



## Setting Boundaries: Summary

“...social work is in many ways an art of setting the right boundaries” (Kapelj, 2022).

Special challenges in modern world

Social media

Email/text/other electronic communication

SW responsible for forming an effective, ethical relationship.

O’Leary et al., 2013; Voshel & Wesala, 2015

## Setting Boundaries: Summary

Development of boundaries should include client participation.

Boundaries become dynamic, both surrounding and connecting the social worker and client.

## Establishing Boundaries: Resources for Social Workers

<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>

A link to the 2021 update NASW Code of Ethics

<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Highlighted-Revisions-to-the-Code-of-Ethics>

Highlighted Revisions to 2021 NASW Code of Ethics

## Establishing Boundaries: Resources for Social Workers

<https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=fxAeCrj2U6c%3d&portalid=0>

FAQ Regarding 2021 Code of Ethics

<https://www.thesocialworkgraduate.com/post/professional-boundaries>

Various resources relevant to professional boundaries, including regular updates



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