



ETHICAL SCENARIOS WORKSHEET (OPTIONAL)

STANDARDS REGARDING TELEHEALTH SERVICES, THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Every day in professional practice, social workers are faced with a variety of ethical dilemmas that they must navigate. Using the NBASW [Code of Ethics](#) (2007), the [Standards Regarding Telehealth Services, the Use of Technology and Social Work Practice](#) (2020), the [Standards for the Use of Technology in Social Work Practice](#) (2010) and any other related practice standards, guidelines, or legislation, take the time to respond to these ethical scenarios. A complete list of NBASW documents can be found on the [NBASW website](#).

In each scenario, take the time to engage in [Ethical Decision Making](#) as you work through the situation, reflecting on what the social worker should do in each case. Once you have completed each scenario, read through the NBASW's recommendations on page 9. Take this time to reflect on how they are similar or different from the responses you came up with.

This worksheet is an optional exercise that coincides with the mandatory [NBASW Ethics, Standards and Guidelines Training pertaining to the Standards Regarding Telehealth Services, the Use of Technology and Social Work Practice](#). Please note the time that it takes you to complete this worksheet, as this time can be applied toward your CPE hours for the current registration year.

Apply Ethical Decision Making

Apply the principles of Ethical Decision Making to each scenario, as you work through them:

1. Identify the ethical issues, including the social work values and duties that conflict.
2. Identify the individuals, groups or organizations that are likely to be affected by the ethical decisions.
3. Tentatively identify all possible courses of action and the participants involved in each along with possible benefits and risks for each.
4. Thoroughly examine the reasons in favor of and opposed to each possible course of action, considering relevant:
 - a. ethical theories, principles, and guidelines;
 - b. codes of ethics and legal principles;
 - c. social work practice theory and principles; and
 - d. personal values (including religious, cultural and ethnic values and political ideology).

5. Reflect on who you would consult in this situation, which may include colleagues and appropriate experts (such as agency staff, supervisors, agency administrators, attorneys, ethics scholars, and ethics committees).
6. Make the decision and document your decision and the decision-making process.
7. Consider how to evaluate, monitor, and document the scenario going forward.

Ethical Scenarios – Worksheet

- 1. A social worker working in a hospital setting has been providing in-person services with a client who is planning to move to another province. The client and the social worker have made great progress toward the client’s therapeutic goals and the client wishes to keep working with the social worker. The client asks the social worker if it would be possible to continue receiving services from them through technological means. Can the social worker able to proceed with delivering services to their client, in their new place of residence?**

- 2. A social worker working in private practice is contacted by an individual who lives on the other side of the province, looking to receive counselling. The social worker offers telehealth services as part of their practice and explains the social work modalities they practice from, as well as the technologies they use to offer their services. The social worker reviews two consent forms with the client, one which discusses the services offered and the other which is specific to telehealth service provision. The client is made fully aware of the risks and benefits associated with all aspects of the service and is interested in proceeding with services. However, the client cannot meet the social worker in person and doesn't have access to a printer. How can the social worker receive proof of consent from the client?**

- 3. A social worker's former client sees the social worker pop up in their recommended friends list on Facebook and decides to send the social worker a friend request. The former client and social worker worked together for some time and had a good working relationship. After the client achieved their treatment goals they stopped receiving services and the social worker and client haven't worked together in numerous years. The social worker receives the request and is unsure how to proceed, questioning whether they should accept or deny the friend request. The social worker's employer does not have any policies regarding social media or how to handle this situation. What questions should the social worker in making this decision and how should the social worker proceed?**

- 4. A social worker is providing electronic services to a client who is a single mom. During their sessions, the client is regularly distracted by their kids and animals in the background. Is it appropriate for the social worker to continue providing services to the client? What should be taken into consideration when making this decision?**

- 5. A social worker has a first session with a client through a secure videoconferencing platform. The client resides with her long-term partner and does not have any children. During their session, the client seems hesitant to talk about her relationship with her partner and begins whispering and looking over her shoulder when the topic of their relationship comes up. The social worker asks the client whether she is safe and the client assures the social worker that she is. While the social worker does not have any direct safety concerns, they are unsure whether it's appropriate to continue the session when the client seems uncomfortable and on edge. What should the social worker do next?**

- 6. A social worker working in private practice is providing telehealth services to a family composed of two parents and two kids (ages 10 and 13). Before having sessions with the family members together, the social worker has been meeting with family members individually. During the meetings, the social worker finds that the youngest child, the 10-year-old, has difficulty focusing and is difficult to engage in the services. What should the social worker do in this case?**

7. A 13-year-old contacts a social worker, who works for a not-for-profit agency, seeking electronic social work services. During the initial phone call, the social worker learns that the youth lives in a rural community with their grandparents, who are not their legal guardians but who are supportive of the youth accessing electronic social work services. The social worker further learns that the youth does not have any contact with their biological parents, who are also their legal guardians. In talking with the youth, the social worker determines the youth can understand the information relevant to the service, appreciate the situation and its consequences, reason, and communicate and express choice. How should the social worker proceed in this situation?

Ethical Scenarios – Discussion and Recommendations from NBASW

1. A social worker working in a hospital setting has been providing in-person services with a client who is planning to move to another province. The client and the social worker have made great progress toward the client’s therapeutic goals and the client wishes to keep working with the social worker. The client asks the social worker if it would be possible to continue receiving services from them through technological means. Can the social worker able to proceed with delivering services to their client, in their new place of residence?

The social worker will not be able to proceed with delivering services to the client until they ensure they have the proper license to practice in the client’s new place of residence. The social work profession is governed by regulatory organizations in each jurisdiction (i.e., each province has an organization that regulates the profession). Being registered as a Practicing Member or a Temporary Authorized Member with the NBASW allows members to offer social work services to clients within New Brunswick but does not extend to practice in jurisdictions outside of New Brunswick. Members are advised to contact the regulatory body of the province where the client is located at the time of services to determine the application requirements of the regulatory body in that province.

2. A social worker working in private practice is contacted by an individual who lives on the other side of the province, looking to receive counselling. The social worker offers telehealth services as part of their practice and explains the social work modalities they practice from, as well as the technologies they use to offer their services. The social worker reviews two consent forms with the client, one which discusses the services offered and the other which is specific to telehealth service provision. The client is made fully aware of the risks and benefits associated with all aspects of the service and is interested in proceeding with services. However, the client cannot meet the social worker in person and doesn’t have access to a printer. How can the social worker receive proof of consent from the client?

If social workers are not able to receive official written consent from a client, the NBASW recommends accepting a consent form that includes the client’s signature (e.g., PDF fillable forms). It is recognized that there are times when clients are unable to provide an electronic signature (e.g., they don’t have access to a computer). In these cases, social workers can accept a client’s verbal consent to receive services and receive written consent at a later date if possible. The social worker must be sure to document the details surrounding the consent received, including the reasons why the social worker was unable to obtain the client’s written consent in the client’s file. As a best practice, when possible, the client should provide written consent at the earliest opportunity, although services may proceed based on verbal consent.

3. A social worker's former client sees the social worker pop up in their recommended friends list on Facebook and decides to send the social worker a friend request. The former client and social worker worked together for some time and had a good working relationship. After the client achieved their treatment goals they stopped receiving services and the social worker and client haven't worked together in numerous years. The social worker receives the request and is unsure how to proceed, questioning whether they should accept or deny the friend request. The social worker's employer does not have any policies regarding social media or how to handle this situation. What questions should the social worker in making this decision and how should the social worker proceed?

Social workers are required to maintain appropriate professional boundaries, as outlined in section 2.1.1. of the Code of Ethics (2007), which states: "Social workers shall maintain appropriate professional boundaries throughout the course of the professional relationship and after the professional relationship". Boundaries are meant to ensure that relationships between social workers and clients remain professional at all times, with this ethical obligation extending to after the social worker-client relationship is complete. Ethical obligations do not have a statute of limitations and should be maintained even after the social worker stops providing services to a client.

When deciding whether to accept or deny the friend request, the social worker should consider what professional boundaries are appropriate and whether accepting a friend request would create confusion and blur the line between the social worker's personal and private life. Social workers should maintain strong professional boundaries to prevent ethical violations (conflicts of interest, boundary violations, dual relationships, etc.) from occurring. The social workers should also consider what their employers' position on the matter would be and whether they would be comfortable accepting a friend request for all their clients (past and present). If not, why would a social worker accept one request and not the other? The social worker should consider how this might be perceived.

To reduce the potential for ethical violations to occur, it is recommended that the social worker does not accept the former client's friend request on social media and instead informs the individual of their ethical and professional obligations concerning the use of social media networks.

The social worker may also consider reviewing their use of social media and may wish to take enhanced security measures, which may include increasing their privacy settings, not sharing details of their personal life, and using a different name on social media.

4. A social worker is providing electronic services to a client who is a single mom. During their sessions, the client is regularly distracted by their kids and animals in the background. Is it appropriate for the social worker to continue providing services to the client? What should be taken into consideration when making this decision?

In a situation such as this, it is important to consider the situation, the client's wishes, and the best interest of the client. Firstly, clients have a right to confidentiality. When providing electronic social work services, this involves privacy in the setting the social work and client are located in. Ideally, the client would be able to meet with the social worker in a confidential space, free of distractions. However, this may not always be possible, depending on a client's individual situation and circumstances.

In this case, the social worker should discuss with the client the nature of their location and the distractions and troubleshoot how the situation could be ameliorated or resolved with the client. The social worker should work with the client to explore the options available to them, which may include a different method of service delivery (meeting in person, meeting in a different setting or location, or meeting at a different time).

It is important to keep the client's wishes and the best interest of the client at the forefront of any decisions that are made. If there are no other options available to the client that would serve to minimize their distractions and if the client wishes to continue receiving services, the social worker should continue providing services to the client as long as the social worker believes the client would positively benefit from the services and continuing services remains in the clients' best interest.

5. A social worker has a first session with a client through a secure videoconferencing platform. The client resides with her long-term partner and does not have any children. During their session, the client seems hesitant to talk about her relationship with her partner and begins whispering and looking over her shoulder when the topic of their relationship comes up. The social worker asks the client whether she is safe and the client assures the social worker that she is. While the social worker does not have any direct safety concerns, they are unsure whether it's appropriate to continue the session when the client seems uncomfortable and on edge. What should the social worker do next?

At the beginning of each session, the social worker should confirm the client's location and assess the safety of the location the client is in. This can be done by asking the client whether it is a good time to talk, who's nearby (home with them) at the time, how the client would be affected if others in the house were to overhear their discussion, whether the client's safe, whether there are any topics that shouldn't be discussed at this time, whether anyone else has access to the client's electronic device and whether the client is able to delete the meeting history from their device, and how the client would get help should they need it (i.e. what community resources can the client draw upon and what personal supports can the client reach out to).

If the client's location is not private, the social worker should explore other options with the client (could the client speak in a different location, meet in person, meet again at a later time, etc.) and work with the client to ensure the sessions occur at the best time and location possible, to maximize client privacy and confidentiality.

The social worker should work with the client to develop a safety plan and must maintain client confidentiality unless the client provides consent for the social worker to release information or the social worker is ethically or legally required to breach confidentiality, including in cases where a social worker has reason to believe their client is in imminent danger.

In this case, since the client appears on edge, the social worker should follow the client's directives and steer the conversation to a topic the client is more comfortable discussing at this time. Discussion on the relationship can always be revisited at a later session.

When making decisions regarding the services they are providing, social workers must remain mindful of the client's wishes, what's in the best interest of the client, and the social worker's employer policies/directives, professional ethical responsibilities, and legal obligations.

6. A social worker working in private practice is providing telehealth services to a family composed of two parents and two kids (ages 10 and 13). Before having sessions with the family members together, the social worker has been meeting with family members individually. During the meetings, the social worker finds that the youngest child, the 10-year-old, has difficulty focusing and is difficult to engage in the services. What should the social worker do in this case?

Virtual appointments are not appropriate in every case and it can, at times, be harder to develop a therapeutic bond with clients without meeting in person. It can be more difficult to read body language and other non-verbal cues when meeting remotely and it is often more difficult to engage clients to the same extent as in person. If the social worker feels that electronic services are not the best way to meet the family's goals and service requirements, the social worker should discuss the matter with the parents and explain their options going forward. In these discussions, the social worker should be sure to emphasize the ways in which electronic services differ from those provided in person, so that the parents are aware that it is extremely normal for clients of any age, but especially younger clients, to have different needs when it comes to service delivery methods, being engaged in sessions, and developing rapport. The options discussed with the parents may include all meetings that involve the 10-year-old occurring in person, rather than online.

7. A 13-year-old contacts a social worker, who works for a not-for-profit agency, seeking electronic social work services. During the initial phone call, the social worker learns that the youth lives in a rural community with their grandparents, who are not their legal guardians but who are supportive of the youth accessing electronic social work services. The social worker further learns that the youth does not have any contact with their biological parents, who are also their legal guardians. In talking with the youth, the social worker determines the youth can understand the information relevant to the service, appreciate the situation and its consequences, reason, and communicate and express choice. How should the social worker proceed in this situation?

Social workers should always arrange an initial meeting with a person who is seeking services, to gain a fulsome understanding of the situation and what the appropriate next steps should be. In this situation, the social worker has assessed the youth as meeting the four capacity indicators that demonstrate them to be a mature minor, capable of providing their own consent for services. As long as the social worker determines that the services are in the youth's best interest, the youth is a mature minor that has a full understanding of both the social work services being delivered and the electronic method of service delivery, and the youth has provided informed consent for services, the social worker may proceed with delivering electronic services to the youth.