

## **The American Board of Clinical Social Work**

### **Code of Ethics**

#### **Introduction**

Ethical principles are fundamental to clinical social work. Ethics are precepts that guide the moral conduct of professionals; they are not the same as practice standards, which prescribe competent practice at various levels of development. Clinical social workers who are board certified by or members of the American Board of Clinical Social Work (ABCSW) are required to adhere to its Ethics Code. They must also observe ethics codes and precepts of relevant state statutes and regulations of the social work membership organizations, employing agencies or uniformed services to which they may belong. The ABCSW's Ethics Code consists of general principles rather than specific rules and regulations. Specific rules and regulations are contained in various sections of some state license statutes, state Societies for Clinical Social Work and the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics. The reader is referred to these codes for additional guidance in matters of ethical conduct, as well as to the principles below.

#### **PRINCIPLES**

##### **I. Responsibility to Clients**

1. Clinical social workers observe the primacy of client need balanced with the right to self-determination. They take all reasonable steps to prevent the client from causing harm to self and others, and use their diagnostic and treatment skills to improve the mental health and social functioning of clients.
2. Early in professional relationships clinical social workers explain their professional identity and qualifications, setting fair fees (no fee-splitting) and defining mutual obligations, including the need to terminate services when not required/desired by the client. They make provisions to avoid abandonment when services must be interrupted.
3. Except as mandated by law, legal precedent or court order, client-clinician communication is privileged and confidential, and the release of such information at any time must occur only with written informed consent of the client, legal guardian, or research subject.
4. Clinical social workers monitor the quality of their services, continuously evaluate their effectiveness, and strive to increase skills, knowledge and mastery. They refrain from conduct in which personal issues or biases may prove harmful or impede competence.
5. Clinical social workers do not use clients for self-interest, do not socialize with clients in a manner detrimental to treatment, and do not exploit clients or engage in sexual harassment or sexual relationships with supervisees, students, employees, research subjects, or current and former clients. The clinician carries the burden of determining that a relationship is appropriate, not detrimental, and does not violate boundaries of roles.

## II. Responsibility to Profession

1. Clinical social workers practice within the legal constraints of their state license(s) and adhere to the ethics codes of the social work organizations to which they belong.
2. Clinical social workers act in a manner that promotes and preserves the professional social work values and the practice standards of clinical social work.
3. Clinical social workers make clear their role when speaking or acting as a private individual rather than as a professional or as a representative of a professional organization.
4. When more than one clinician is involved in the care of a client, clinical social workers seek to coordinate treatment. They are obligated to address any collaborative issues that are not in the best interest of the client.

## III. Responsibility to Society

1. Clinical social workers do not discriminate against anyone, including discrimination due to age, race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation.
2. Clinical social workers, acting as practitioners, instructors, supervisors, or employers, take care to avoid incompetence, dishonesty, fraud, deceit, misrepresentation, or dishonorable business practices.
3. If an employing entity's practices/policies conflict with professional ethics or practice standards, the clinician shall seek to bring about change in the employing entity.
4. Clinical social workers conduct research in a manner consistent with the values/standards of clinical social work practice, and report findings accurately.

## Adjudication

In order to uphold the integrity of its certifications and the standards of its membership, the ABCSW may reprimand or censure a certificant or member, or suspend or revoke his/her certification/membership, for any of the following reasons:

- Breach of this ethics code,
- Conviction of a felony or crime of moral turpitude,
- Misdemeanor based on professional shortcomings,
- Incompetence (professional or mental) or narcotics addiction or habitual intoxication,
- Expulsion from other social work organizations, or revocation of state licensure or certification.

The ABCSW may make public any disciplinary action taken against the practitioner.