# Ethical Principles and Responsibilities

**Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) social work licensing examinations**

8 knowledge statements · ASWB 2026 content outline

This competency covers the ethical foundation of practice: the duties social workers owe to clients, colleagues, the profession and society, informed consent, confidentiality and its limits, ethical dilemmas, core values, and the worker's own fitness to practice through self-care and professional development. The exam rarely asks you to recite a code; it gives you a situation and asks which action honors the code FIRST or BEST, usually the one that protects the client, respects self-determination and keeps you within your competence.

**You should be able to:** You should be able to name the duty at stake in a vignette, explain what informed consent and confidentiality require and where they stop, apply an ethical decision process, and recognize when your own wellbeing or competence is the issue.

## Every knowledge statement and its key point

**Legal and ethical issues related to the practice of social work, including responsibility to clients/client systems, colleagues, the profession, and society**

The NASW Code of Ethics (2021) is organized by responsibility: section 1 to clients, 2 to colleagues, 3 in practice settings, 4 as professionals, 5 to the profession, 6 to the broader society. The CASW Code of Ethics (2024) plays the same role in Canada, alongside each province's regulatory code.

**Principles and processes of obtaining informed consent**

Valid consent has three parts: the person has capacity, the decision is voluntary, and the person has been given and understands the relevant information.

**Legal and ethical issues regarding confidentiality, including limitations of confidentiality (e.g., HIPAA, PHI, privacy)**

Confidentiality is the worker's ethical duty not to disclose; privilege is the client's legal right to keep communications out of court. In the US, Jaffee v. Redmond (1996) recognized psychotherapist-patient privilege for licensed clinical social workers in federal courts.

**Identifying and resolving ethical dilemmas**

An ethical dilemma is a choice between two or more ethical duties that cannot all be honored (for example, self-determination versus protection from harm), not a choice between right and wrong.

**Professional values and principles (e.g., competence, social justice, integrity, dignity and worth of the person)**

NASW's six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence; each has a matching ethical principle.

**Burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue**

Burnout (Maslach) has three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism toward clients, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. It builds slowly from workload and organizational conditions.

**Social worker self-care principles**

The NASW Code's 2021 Purpose states that professional self-care is paramount for competent and ethical practice; it is a professional duty, not an indulgence.

**Importance of professional development activities to improve practice and maintain current professional knowledge (e.g., in-service training, licensing requirements, reviews of literature, workshops, on-going supervision, consultation)**

Social workers must keep current with emerging knowledge and practice (NASW 4.01) and employers should provide or arrange continuing education (NASW 3.08).

## Common pitfalls

- Choosing consultation or documentation FIRST when the vignette shows imminent risk: safety comes before process.
- Treating a subpoena as a court order and releasing records; the correct step is to protect the record and involve the client and counsel.
- Confusing confidentiality (your ethical duty) with privilege (the client's legal right, which the client can waive).
- Assuming a signed form equals informed consent, or that consent once given never needs revisiting.
- Solving the worker's own stress or impairment by sharing it with clients or ignoring it, instead of taking it to supervision, treatment or a lighter caseload.

## Key terms

**Informed consent:** A voluntary agreement by a capable person who understands the purpose, risks, alternatives and limits of a service.

**Confidentiality:** The ethical duty not to disclose client information without consent, except as the law or serious risk requires.

**Privileged communication:** The client's legal right to keep communications with the worker out of legal proceedings; the client holds it.

**Minimum necessary:** Disclose only the information needed for the purpose, to the people who need it.

**Ethical dilemma:** A situation in which two valid ethical duties conflict and both cannot be fully met.

**Compassion fatigue:** Exhaustion and trauma symptoms from caring for traumatized people: secondary traumatic stress plus burnout.

**Impairment:** A condition that interferes with professional judgment or performance and obliges the worker to seek help or step back.

ExamDragon, examdragon.com/aswb. Independent exam preparation, not affiliated with or endorsed by ASWB; written in our own words from ASWB's 2026 content outlines.