

HOW TO TAKE AN ETHICS INVENTORY: A KEY TO STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

Mark Twain (1901) once said, “Always do right. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest.” Twain’s wisdom reflects an important aspect of ethics for modern professionals. In the study of professional ethics, a distinction is often made between *mandatory* standards and *aspirational* principles. Aspirational principles represent ethical ideals or the ethical “ceiling” of behavior, whereas mandatory requirements represent minimal, enforceable standards or the “floor” of ethical behavior (Haas & Malouf, 2005, p. 4).

Because state licensing boards are primarily concerned with enforceable standards, many practitioners focus on meeting the minimal standards that are required. Although this level of compliance is usually sufficient for a professional to maintain a minimally acceptable standard of practice, it is not sufficient to aspire to the highest ideals of the profession. The best practices of a profession are better achieved by practitioners who strive for excellence, not only staying above the floor by reaching for the ceiling.

The following Ethics Inventory provides a brief checklist of some often neglected areas of ethical practice. Although neglecting these areas is not itself likely to result in a complaint or lawsuit, neither is such negligence likely to result in aspiring to excellence in practice.

Competence

Have I practiced in areas in which I am not competent, proficient, or trained?

Have I practiced below a standard of excellence through complacency or lack of diligence?

Have I viewed continuing education as a reporting requirement rather than as an opportunity to learn?

Conflicts of Interest

Have I engaged in any actual or apparent conflicts of interest?

Have I engaged in any perceived or potential conflicts of interest?

Have I neglected to balance competing interests of organizations and the clients, patients, or students they serve?

Confidentiality

Have I discussed confidential client information in a hallway or elevator?

Have I emailed or texted confidential client information without encryption?

Have I gossiped or told stories about clients, patients, or students?

Welfare of Others

Have I experienced a lack of empathy or compassion, or kindness toward my clients?

Have I been condescending or disrespectful toward clients or patients?

Have I referred prospective clients because they might be time-consuming?

Have I been demanding or demeaning toward office staff?

Client and Patient Care

Have I refused to treat certain clients because they are difficult or stuck?

Have I become complacent with office visits rather than looking forward to seeing clients?

Have I neglected the spiritual or religious needs of my clients?

Have legal liability considerations become more important than good patient care?

Relationships With Other Professionals

Have I ridiculed or gossiped about a particular colleague or practitioner?

Have I made critical or disparaging comments about another profession?

Have I been condescending or disrespectful toward other colleagues?

Have I ignored, rationalized, or covered up the unethical conduct of a colleague?

Accuracy and Honesty in Reporting Data

Have I upcoded or downcoded a diagnosis code primarily for financial gain?

Have I billed an insurance company for in-person services that were not in-person?

Have I billed a managed care company for a contracted service that I did not personally provide?

Have I inflated projected costs or expenses when applying for a grant?

Documentation and Record-Keeping

Have documentation requirements detracted from the best interests of my clients?

Have I written progress notes that I would not want my client to read?

Have I written progress notes that I would not want my client's attorney to read?

Education, Teaching, and Training

Have I been neglecting opportunities to teach students, colleagues, or the public?

Have I been unenthusiastic or unprepared in teaching my classes?

Have I been condescending or disrespectful toward students or trainees?

Public Statements

Have I inflated or exaggerated my achievements on my website?

Have I asked for testimonials from clients or former clients?

Have I commingled my professional and personal social media sites?

Maintaining Self-Care and Vitality

Have my own personal problems or neglect of boundaries compromised my patient care?

Have factors of fatigue or burnout rendered me unable to focus?

Political Advocacy

Have I neglected to volunteer my time or talent to organizations involved in provision of mental health education, support, and advocacy?

Have I neglected to be active in my national professional organization to improve parity for health care?

Have I neglected being active in my state professional organization to improve my profession?

Have I neglected to participate in the political process to bring about fair, accessible, and affordable health care for patients?

Community Service

Have I neglected to be active in local community organizations to reduce the stigma of mental illness?

Have I neglected to work within my local community to provide care to the underserved?

Have I neglected to be an active and contributing member of my church, synagogue, or mosque?

Have I neglected to provide pro bono care without any financial remuneration?

Aspirational Considerations: General

How can I learn more about areas in which I am lacking in knowledge or skills?

How can I be more sensitive, respectful, and affirming of colleagues, clients, and students?

How can I work within my community to provide better care to the oppressed, underserved, and underprivileged?

How can I be more honest and accurate when assigning grades, applying for grants, and filing insurance claims?

How can I provide information to students and parents/guardians in a manner similar to how I would want a teacher, researcher, or therapist to provide an explanation to me?

How can I take better care of my physical, emotional, and spiritual needs in a way that makes me better able to focus my best on the well-being of others?

How can I better protect the privacy of confidential information entrusted to me by my students, colleagues, or administrators?

How can I maintain a better balance of boundaries in counseling that protects my students from harm and that maximizes their chances for growth, guidance, and actualization?

How can I consult with colleagues who will not necessarily agree with me or how can I give all details or facts in a way that is designed to achieve the best practice?

How can I take an ongoing personal and professional inventory and admit any wrongs I have done, take corrective action, and make amends to others?

Ethical Considerations: Supervision
Enforceable Ethical Standards

Do I stay current in knowledge of supervision models, and I am open to theoretical perspectives other than my own?

Do I provide regular, timely, and evidence-based evaluations of my students, interns, and post-docs?

Do I clearly explain roles, rights, and responsibilities at the outset and throughout the process of supervision?

Do I protect the privacy of confidential information entrusted to me by my supervisees and their clients?

Do I respect boundaries in a way that protects my supervisees from harm and maximizes their benefits?

Do I supervise only in areas in which I have knowledge, proficiency, and skills as a therapist and as a supervisor?

Do I establish informed consent adequately with supervisees, and do I explain how they are to do so with their clients?

Do I provide a role model of ethical and professional behavior for my students, interns, post-doctoral fellows, and colleagues?

Do I prepare my supervisees on how to handle emergencies and crisis situations on occasions when I am not available?

Am I aware of multicultural considerations and power differentials between me and my supervisees, as well as between my supervisees and their clients?

Aspirational Considerations: Supervision
Best Ethical Practices

How can I learn more about areas in which I am lacking in knowledge, and how can I be more open to other perspectives?

How can I provide more regular, timely, regular, and criterion-based evaluations of my supervisees?

How can I better explain roles, rights, and responsibilities at the outset and throughout the process of supervision?

How can I better protect the privacy of confidential information with my supervisees and their clients?

How can I maintain better boundaries that protect my supervisee from harm and maximize their success?

How can I become more knowledgeable and proficient about areas in which I am lacking in knowledge or skills?

How can I better explain ways that my supervisees can inform their student role to their clients?

How can I serve as a better ethical and professional role model for my students, interns, post-doctoral fellows, and colleagues?

How can I better prepare my supervisees how to handle emergencies and crisis situations?

How can I be more aware of multicultural considerations and power differentials with my supervisees?

References

Haas, L. J., & Malouf, J. L. (2005). *Keeping up the good work: A practitioner's guide to mental health ethics* (4th ed.). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press.

Twain, M. (1901, February 16). *To the Young People's Society*. Brooklyn, NY: Greenpoint Presbyterian Church.

Resources

Doverspike, W. F. (2000, November). *Ethics checklist: Ten tests of ethicality*. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Documentation

This document is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: How to Check Your Ethics.doc

Server path:

http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_take_an_ethics_inventory.pdf

Server file name:

how_to_take_an_ethics_inventory.pdf

Website tab: Presentations

Link name: Ethics Inventory: Questions for Practice

Website tab: Publications

Link name: Ethics Inventory: Questions for Practice

Seminar Handouts:

Handouts - Ethics Inventory - Part 1 & Part 2 (Doverspike, 2000).docx

These handouts are used in an exercise in my professional continuing education seminars (Ethics Workshop - 2020.pptx) and in a graduate course in a doctoral training program in clinical psychology (Psychology PSYC 702 - OPA - Ethical Decision Making in Psychology: Professional, Ethical, and Legal Standards) at Emory University.

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The article is linked to the Publications and Presentations tabs of website under the link titled "Ethics Inventory: Questions for Practice."