

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

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

Have I made 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 comingled 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?

## 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.

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**Content last updated 2020.**

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2000, November). *How to take an ethics inventory: A key to striving for excellence*. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>