

Ethical Dilemmas, Ethical Decision-Making Models, and Case Studies

Ethical violations and **ethical dilemmas** are two distinct concepts related to ethics, but they have different meanings and implications:

- **Ethical violations** occur when one knowingly or unknowingly acts in a way that directly contradicts established ethical principles, codes of conduct, or moral standards. It involves a clear breach of ethical guidelines and can result in harm to others, erosion of trust, and potential consequences, such as disciplinary actions or legal repercussions. They are clear breaches of ethical standards.
 - *Example:* A healthcare provider intentionally disclosing confidential patient information without consent is an ethical violation as it goes against the principle of respecting privacy and confidentiality.
- **Ethical dilemmas** are situations when one faces conflicting moral principles or ethical guidelines, making it challenging to determine the right course of action. In ethical dilemmas, there may not be a straightforward or clear-cut solution, and the individual must carefully consider various ethical aspects before making a decision. They represent two or more ethical principles that are at odds in a given situation.
 - *Example:* A therapist learns from a client that the client's friend is in imminent danger due to illegal activities. The therapist faces an ethical dilemma, as they must balance the duty to maintain client confidentiality and the ethical obligation to protect potential victims.

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

There are multiple models that can be used to resolve ethical dilemmas. One long-standing model is the Four Component Model developed by Rest and Narvaez (1994) to guide behavior of health professionals and resolve ethical conflicts. It outlines the following steps:

1. **Moral/ethical sensitivity** is the ability to identify and discern problematic situations with ethical dimensions.
2. **Application of moral judgment** moves us beyond recognizing that ethical dimensions are present in a given situation to explore which line of action is morally justified given the ethical principles of a context or profession
3. **Engagement of moral motivation** addresses competing choices to help choose the one that best aligns with the ethics of the profession and compels that personal values and self-interest do not take precedence over ethical principles.
4. **Acting with moral intent** - take action, display courage in your actions, and be able to explain and defend your choice.

When outlining your possible options, you need to look at all possible outcomes, both positive and negative, as well as intended and unintended consequences. It can be helpful to identify the risk of harm for each option: minimal risk, moderate risk, and significant risk.

Access to Recovery outlines the following steps as another option to consider:

Steps for Resolving an Ethical Issue

Step 1: Discuss details of the situation with your supervisor.

Guiding questions:

- What are the facts? What are just opinions or rumors about this situation?
- How can I get the facts? Who do I need to talk with to gather information?

Step 2: Identify the ethical concern.

Guiding questions:

- Now that we know the facts, does this situation pose an ethical problem?
- If this is an ethical problem, what principle in our organization's code of ethics has been violated?

Step 3: Describe possible solutions and the pros and cons of each one.

Guiding questions:

- What are some of the ways we could address this ethics problem?
- Of the possible solutions we have, which causes the least harm to all parties?
- Who else do we need to involve for their advice or point of view? (e.g., legal counsel, counselor, provider, administrator)

Step 4: Decide on which solution to pursue and take action.

Guiding questions:

- Do we have consensus around our next steps to address this ethics issue?
- Who is responsible for those next steps?
- How will we document or record our actions?
- How will we know if we are successful and if the situation has been resolved?

Below, you will find three case studies that have at least two ethical principles from the DBSA Model Code of Ethics for Peer Specialists that are conflict. The Four Component Model has been applied to show potential resolutions using this particular model. Please keep in mind that every ethical dilemma is unique and requires careful consideration. All possible courses of action and their potential outcomes and consequences should be outlined before proceeding. One should prioritize consultation with coworkers and colleagues when resolving dilemmas.

CASE STUDY #1

Peer Specialist Alice is providing support to a client, Bob, who is in the process of reentering society after serving a prison sentence. Throughout their peer support sessions, Alice shares her personal recovery story with Bob, detailing her own experiences with addiction and the challenges she faced during her reintegration process. Alice believes that sharing her journey can provide hope and encouragement to Bob, helping him understand that recovery is possible.

On the other hand, Alice is also aware of the ethical principle of seeking to role-model recovery. She understands the importance of modeling healthy behaviors and demonstrating positive coping strategies to inspire those she supports. Alice wants to be a role model for Bob by showing him that she has overcome obstacles and is now living a fulfilling life in recovery.

However, Alice starts noticing that sharing her personal recovery story repeatedly during sessions may overshadow the focus on Bob's needs and goals. Bob seems interested in her

experiences, but he starts relying on Alice's achievements rather than developing his own coping mechanisms. Additionally, Alice becomes concerned that she may unintentionally trigger some of Bob's own traumatic memories, given the similarities between their past experiences. Alice wants to provide support and hope through her personal story but also understands that being a role model involves empowering Bob to develop his own strengths and resilience.

Can you identify which ethical principles are involved here? How could Alice resolve this ethical dilemma?

Potential Resolutions for Case Study #1

Alice could resolve this ethical dilemma by following a decision-making model that takes into consideration the Code of Ethics for Peer Specialists, such as the Four Component Model. Let's explore how Alice can apply this model to her situation:

1. **Moral Sensitivity:** This involves recognizing that an ethical dilemma exists and being aware of the potential consequences of actions. Alice has already demonstrated moral sensitivity by recognizing the conflict between sharing her personal recovery story to inspire Bob and the risk of overshadowing his needs and goals.
2. **Moral Judgment:** In this step, Alice needs to consider the ethical principles from the Code of Ethics and weigh the potential courses of action:
 - a. Principle 1 and 2: Recognizing Bob's strengths, abilities, rights, and dignity is essential.
 - b. Principle 3 and 4: Alice should indeed share her recovery story to inspire and role-model recovery, but she must also ensure that it does not hinder Bob's development of his coping mechanisms.
 - c. Principle 5: Maintaining confidentiality and privacy is important.
 - d. Principle 6: Alice should avoid any behavior that might intimidate, threaten, or exploit Bob emotionally.
 - e. Principle 10: She should not enter into dual relationships or commitments that might compromise the support she provides to Bob.
3. **Moral Motivation:** This step involves choosing the course of action that aligns with ethical principles and the overall well-being of Bob. Alice should consider the potential risks and benefits of sharing her recovery story in various ways and assess how each approach may impact Bob's progress and empowerment.
4. **Moral Courage:** Implementing the chosen course of action may require moral courage to address any challenges or discomfort that might arise. Alice needs to be confident in her decision and have the courage to adjust her approach if necessary to better support Bob's needs.

Based on the Four Component Model and the Code of Ethics for Peer Specialists, Alice can consider the following ways to resolve the ethical dilemma:

1. **Limit the Frequency:** Alice can continue sharing her recovery story but limit how often she does so during sessions. This will give Bob more space and time to focus on his own needs and goals.
2. **Reframe the Narrative:** When sharing her recovery story, Alice can ensure she emphasizes the process of growth, resilience, and coping strategies she used, rather than solely focusing on her achievements. This can inspire Bob while also encouraging him to develop his own coping mechanisms.
3. **Encourage Self-Reflection:** Alice can prompt Bob to reflect on his own experiences and strengths during their sessions. This way, he can actively engage in the process of developing his recovery path.
4. **Provide Resources:** Along with sharing her personal story, Alice can provide additional resources, such as books, articles, or workshops, that align with Bob's recovery needs. This will expand his knowledge and understanding of recovery beyond Alice's experiences.
5. **Seek Supervision and Consultation:** Alice can discuss her ethical dilemma with her supervisor or a colleague to gain different perspectives and insights on how to best support Bob without compromising ethical guidelines.
6. **Establish Boundaries:** Alice should maintain clear boundaries with Bob to ensure that the support she provides remains professional and focused on his needs. This may involve refraining from sharing certain personal details that could trigger Bob's traumatic memories.

By employing this decision-making model and considering the ethical principles in the Code of Ethics, Alice can navigate this ethical dilemma and continue to provide effective and ethical support to Bob as he reintegrates into society.

CASE STUDY #2

Anna is working with a young individual, John, who has been struggling with severe depression and social isolation. Anna believes in the strength and resilience of individuals and is determined to support John in his recovery journey. They have established a strong and trusting relationship through open and honest conversations.

One day, John shares with Anna that he has developed romantic feelings towards her. Anna is taken aback by this revelation and understands the ethical importance of respecting the rights and dignity of those she serves (Ethics #2) and not engaging in sexual/intimate activities with colleagues or those she serves (Ethics #11). She also recognizes the significance of maintaining healthy boundaries to foster recovery (Ethics #9) and not entering into dual relationships that could conflict with the interests of those she serves (Ethics #10).

However, Anna also understands the importance of being open and transparent with those she serves (Ethics #3) and keeping the communication channels open. She is now facing a conflict between respecting John's dignity and their commitment to fostering recovery while maintaining a trusting and honest relationship with him.

How can Anna resolve this ethical dilemma?

Potential Resolutions for Case Study #2

Anna could resolve this ethical dilemma by using a decision-making model again, considering the Code of Ethics for Peer Specialists, and addressing the specific situation with John. Let's apply the Four Component Model to this case:

1. **Moral Sensitivity:** Anna has already demonstrated moral sensitivity by recognizing the ethical dilemma she faces. She understands the importance of respecting John's dignity and the ethical principles related to not engaging in intimate relationships with those she serves.
2. **Moral Judgment:** In this step, Anna should consider the ethical principles from the Code of Ethics and the potential consequences of various actions:
 - a. Principle 2 and 11: Respecting John's dignity and avoiding intimate relationships are non-negotiable ethical principles.
 - b. Principle 9 and 10: Maintaining healthy boundaries and avoiding dual relationships are crucial for fostering recovery and ensuring the best interests of those she serves.
 - c. Principle 3: Anna values open and honest communication, but this must be balanced with the need to maintain appropriate boundaries.
3. **Moral Motivation:** Anna needs to choose the course of action that aligns with the ethical principles and promotes John's well-being and recovery. This may involve making difficult decisions that prioritize his needs over the potential discomfort of addressing the issue.
4. **Moral Courage:** Implementing the chosen course of action may require moral courage to have open and honest conversations with John about the boundaries of their relationship and the importance of maintaining a professional and supportive dynamic.

Based on the Four Component Model and the Code of Ethics for Peer Specialists, Anna could consider the following ways to resolve the ethical dilemma:

1. **Establish Boundaries:** Anna should have a candid conversation with John about the boundaries of their relationship. She should explain that it is essential to maintain a professional and supportive role, and that engaging in romantic or intimate activities would not be appropriate and could harm the trust they have built.
2. **Reaffirm Trust and Support:** While addressing John's feelings, Anna can reassure him of the trust they have established and her commitment to support him in his recovery journey. Emphasizing that boundaries are necessary for the effectiveness of their peer

support can help him understand the importance of maintaining a professional relationship.

3. Reframe the Relationship: Anna can focus on the value of their supportive and caring peer relationship without engaging in romantic aspects. She can highlight the importance of a peer specialist providing unconditional positive regard and empathy without crossing into romantic territory.
4. Seek Supervision and Consultation: Anna should seek supervision or consultation with a more experienced peer specialist or a supervisor to discuss the situation and ensure she is handling it ethically and appropriately.
5. Referrals if Necessary: If John's feelings persist and affect his recovery progress or the therapeutic dynamic, Anna may consider referring him to another peer specialist or mental health professional to ensure he receives the best support possible.
6. Regular Review: Anna should regularly review and reflect on the boundaries of her relationship with John to ensure that she continues to provide appropriate support and maintains ethical standards.

By addressing this situation with sensitivity and adhering to the Code of Ethics, Anna can navigate this ethical dilemma while maintaining a supportive and professional relationship with John, thus continuing to empower him in his recovery journey.

CASE STUDY #3

In a bustling urban community center, a peer support group has been providing a safe space for individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences and struggles. The group is led by a dedicated facilitator, Sarah, who is known for her empathetic and non-judgmental approach to helping others. The core values of the group emphasize respecting the dignity of all members and maintaining impartiality throughout the support process. They place high value on respect diverse backgrounds and social identities and work hard to recognize and promote the strengths, values, and dignity of each person.

One day, a member from a close-knit traditional community with strong cultural values, presents an ethical dilemma. Aisha, a warm-hearted and grateful participant in the peer support group, comes from a cultural background where gift-giving holds immense importance as a way to express appreciation and respect. Having found solace and strength in the group during a challenging period, she wishes to express her gratitude to Sarah, the facilitator. According to her cultural tradition, presenting a gift of significant value to someone who has helped her is not only a gesture of thanks but also a way to foster a stronger bond. Aisha's cultural background places great importance on gift-giving as a way to honor others and demonstrate appreciation. Refusing a gift in her culture can be seen as a direct rejection of her gratitude and may inadvertently cause harm to the relationship between Aisha and Sarah.

How can Sarah resolve this ethical dilemma?

Potential Resolutions for Case Study #3

Sarah could use the Four Component Model of ethical decision-making to navigate this ethical dilemma involving gift-giving from Aisha, considering the core values of the peer support group and the principles of respecting diversity and maintaining impartiality. Let's go through each component of the model:

1. **Moral Sensitivity:** Sarah demonstrates moral sensitivity by recognizing the ethical dilemma presented by Aisha's cultural tradition of gift-giving. She understands the significance of the gesture in Aisha's culture and is aware that refusing the gift may have unintended consequences on their relationship.
2. **Moral Judgment:** In this step, Sarah should consider the ethical principles and values that guide the peer support group. Specifically, she must weigh the following aspects:
 - a. **Principle 2:** Respecting the dignity of all members, including Aisha, and recognizing the importance of her cultural background and traditions.
 - b. **Principle 10:** Maintaining impartiality and treating all group members equally, avoiding any perception of favoritism or special treatment.
 - c. **Principle 13:** Ensuring that accepting the gift does not compromise the integrity or professional boundaries of the peer support relationship.
3. **Moral Motivation:** Sarah needs to decide on a course of action that aligns with ethical principles while promoting a supportive and inclusive environment in the peer support group. She must prioritize Aisha's well-being and the group's cohesion while maintaining her role as a facilitator.
4. **Moral Courage:** Implementing the chosen course of action may require moral courage to have an open and honest conversation with Aisha about the gift-giving dilemma. Sarah should explain the core values of the peer support group, including the importance of treating all members equally, and express her appreciation for Aisha's gesture while also explaining the need to maintain professional boundaries.

Based on the Four Component Model, Sarah could resolve this ethical dilemma by:

1. **Having a Conversation with Aisha:** Sarah should have a private and respectful conversation with Aisha to acknowledge and appreciate her cultural tradition of gift-giving. She can express gratitude for the gesture and the intention behind it. However, she should also explain the core values of the peer support group, emphasizing the importance of treating all members equally and avoiding any perception of favoritism.
2. **Suggesting Alternative Expressions of Appreciation:** While declining the significant gift, Sarah can suggest alternative ways for Aisha to express her appreciation within the group's guidelines. This may include writing a heartfelt letter, sharing her feelings during a group session, or engaging in activities that align with the group's values.
3. **Reaffirming the Supportive Relationship:** Sarah should emphasize that her acceptance or refusal of the gift does not diminish the support and appreciation she has for Aisha as

a group member. Reassure Aisha that her participation in the group and her contributions are valued and that the decision is about maintaining the integrity of the peer support environment.

4. **Educating and Fostering Understanding:** As a peer support facilitator, Sarah can take the opportunity to educate the group about cultural diversity and the importance of understanding and respecting different cultural traditions. This can further strengthen the group's values of recognizing and promoting the strengths and dignity of each individual.

By using the Four Component Model and prioritizing the core values of the peer support group, Sarah can navigate this ethical dilemma with sensitivity and integrity, while ensuring that the group remains a safe and inclusive space for all its members.

Additional Resources

- [Model Code of Ethics for Peer Support Workers](#) - DBSA
- [Establishing Ethical Practices for Peer Recovery Support Services Within the ATR Model](#) - SAMHSA Technical Assistance and Access to Recovery
- [Ethical Guidelines for the Delivery of Peer-based Recovery Support Services](#) - Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center
- [Black and White and Grey All Over: Peer Support Ethics](#) - Lisa Goodale, MSW
- [Eye on Ethics: The Challenge of Peer Support Programs](#) - Frederic G. Reamer, PhD