

Ethics in Prevention: A Guide for Substance Misuse Prevention Practitioners

Ethical Decision-Making Process

As a prevention professional, it is your responsibility to act ethically. In many situations it is clear how to respond in ways that are consistent with the Prevention Code of Ethics. However, some situations may be more challenging, particularly when values (your own or other peoples') compete or conflict. When faced with such ethical dilemmas, it is helpful to use an objective process to guide your decisions and actions. An ethical decision-making process can be most useful when you, or a team you work with, is faced with an issue or situation where a number of important values are at stake, and where...

...there seems to be no single best response.

...there is a recognized difference of opinion.

...people don't feel good about the circumstances or the possible resolution.

The ethical decision-making process presented in this course includes four steps: *Assess*, *Plan*, *Implement*, and *Evaluate*. There are specific tasks within each of the steps that build upon one another and will help you determine how to respond ethically to challenging situations. Here is the full decision-making process:



Let's take a closer look at each step and its related tasks.

Assess

Assessing an ethical dilemma involves the following tasks:

1. *Identify the problem:*
 - Establish the facts: Remember that facts are objective and unbiased, not based on personal opinion or perception.
 - State the problem in one sentence: Draw on the facts and use concrete, specific, and neutral terms.
 - Use the Prevention Code of Ethics to identify the specific principle(s) involved in the situation.
2. *Consider influential factors:*
 - Internal factors: These can include your personal perspective, values, and needs that might introduce bias or otherwise affect your decision.
 - External factors: These can include the perspectives of other involved parties, including their rights, vulnerabilities, and responsibilities.

3. *Consult with others:* To better understand the situation, it's also useful to consult with others who may have more knowledge or experience with the issues involved. This can include colleagues, a supervisor, or relevant professionals such as a state department overseeing substance misuse prevention, other organizations with existing policies related to these issues, or legal counsel.

Plan

Planning how to address an ethical dilemma involves the following tasks:

1. *Brainstorm ALL possible options,* no matter how impractical or unrealistic they may seem.
2. *Eliminate unethical options.*
3. *Consider the remaining options,* weighing their pros and cons.

Implement

Implementing a solution to an ethical dilemma involves the following tasks:

1. *Make a decision:* Decide what you believe is the most ethical and appropriate option.
2. *Carry out the decision:* Establish action steps for carrying out the decision you have made.

Evaluate

Evaluation is the final step in the ethical decision-making process. Use the following questions as a guide to reflect on and assess your decision and actions.

1. What was the outcome of the decision?
2. What worked well?
3. What would you do differently?
4. Should anything more be done?