



Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.

Termination of the Social-Worker Client Relationship

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Social workers spend a great deal of time at the onset of the social worker-client relationship ensuring that clients have all the information they need to proceed with an intervention or service. While termination of the professional relationship may not seem imminent at that time, termination should be discussed as part of the initial informed consent process. This article will explore endings in the social worker-client relationship and highlight some of the ethical considerations and issues that may arise within the context of termination.

Why is Discussion Regarding the Termination of the Professional Relationship Important?

Informed consent is defined as a “Voluntary agreement reached by a capable client based on information about foreseeable risks and benefits associated with the agreement (e.g., participation in counselling or agreement to disclose social work report to a third party)” (Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), 2005, p. 10). The informed consent process is integral to the social worker-client relationship and is in keeping with the ethical principles of self-determination, autonomy, and respect.

Termination is “The conclusion of the social worker-client intervention process; a systematic procedure for disengaging the working relationship. It occurs when goals are reached, when the specified time for working has ended, or when the client is no longer interested in continuing...” (Barker, 2014, p. 428).

Discussion on termination and the timeframe for social work intervention is an important part of the informed consent process. It helps the client to understand the parameters in which they will be engaged in the professional relationship and to create realistic expectations. It is also part of the duty of care to clients.

While termination of the social worker-client relationship may seem straightforward, there are many ethical considerations that can arise related to boundaries, competence, conflicts of interest, and client self-determination. Consider the following scenarios.

Scenario 1

Katie RSW, has been providing counselling for a young woman dealing with anxiety. The client is doing extremely well and the relationship is coming to an end as the agreed upon goals have been met. During their last session, the client asks Katie if they can meet for coffee from time to time. Katie personally feels that she has a lot in common with the client and is someone with whom she could be a friend. Katie wonders how she should handle this request.

This case raises some interesting questions related to terminations and professional boundaries. As a first step, it would be important for Katie to reflect on the following values and principles in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics.

Value 1: Respect for Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

- Social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority.

Value 3: Service to Humanity

- Social workers place needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity.

Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice

- Social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients.

Dual relationships occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship (professional, social, or business). Continuing to see a client after the professional relationship has ended would be considered a dual relationship. While not all dual relationships are harmful, or unavoidable, the social worker is responsible for evaluating the impact of dual relationships on clients

and for establishing appropriate professional boundaries with clients even after the professional relationship has ended.

In navigating this dilemma, the following questions would be helpful for Katie to consider:

- 1) What expectations does the client have for wanting to meet with the social worker after the clinical relationship has ended? Will the client still be expecting ongoing professional guidance? Is the client hoping to develop a friendship with Katie?
- 2) Is the client feeling anxious about the ending of the professional relationship?
- 3) Is there a need for additional clinical intervention beyond the initial social worker-client contract? What is the likelihood of the client needing additional social work services?
- 4) What expectations would the social worker have in engaging in a dual relationship with the client? Whose needs are being met?
- 5) Would meeting the client outside the parameters of the social worker-client relationship be creating a blend between her personal and professional life?
- 6) Could client confidentiality be impacted?
- 7) How might Katie deal with information obtained through a personal relationship that could impact on the clients' future need for social work services?
- 8) How would Katie feel about a former client knowing details about her personal life that wouldn't normally be shared within the context of the social work relationship?
- 9) Would Katie consider this type of request by other clients?
- 10) How might this be viewed by her colleagues and peers?
- 11) Is this something she would document in the client file?

The use of self-reflection and professional judgement is key to resolving this ethical dilemma. Katie would be encouraged to review the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and to work through the reflective questions posed above. Katie would also be encouraged to consult with a colleague or her supervisor/manager.

Scenario 2

Christine RSW, has been working with a young man dealing with early childhood trauma. The client raised concern that the current treatment plan is not working and asks about a new therapeutic approach that he read about online called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Christine attended a few education sessions on EMDR, but has not received formalized training. How should Christine respond to this client request?

This case highlights ethical considerations related to competence and termination. A reflection on Value 6 (Competence in Professional Practice) in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and the following ethical principles would be important:

- Social workers uphold the right of clients to be offered the highest quality service possible.
- Social workers demonstrate due care for client's interests and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence.

The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice also provide some guidance:

- Social workers renegotiate or terminate professional services when these services are no longer required or no longer meet the needs of clients (1.8.1).
- Social workers discuss client's needs, options and preferences before continuing or discontinuing services, or offering to seek transfer or referral (1.8.4).
- Social workers at the earliest opportunity inform clients of any factor, condition or pressure that affects their ability to practice adequately and competently (1.8.5).

EMDR is a complementary therapy. Barker (2014) defines complementary therapy as "An additional type of intervention that the social worker or other psychotherapist provides for certain clients, occurring along with individual therapy..." (p. 84). The NLASW (2011) refers to complementary and adjunct therapies and techniques as "intervention by a registered social worker within the context of the social work relationship which is outside of the conventional practice of social work and is not the primary modality of treatment" (p. 1).

After reflecting on the ethical values and principles in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, Christine needs to consider whether she has the appropriate knowledge and expertise at this point to integrate EMDR into her practice. Christine would be encouraged to read the guideline document prepared by the NLASW (2011) titled *Complementary & Adjunct Therapies & Techniques: A Guide for Registered Social Workers*. This guide highlights that social workers using complementary & adjunct therapies and techniques in practice a) must be well informed about the therapy or technique including the risks and benefits and must possess the appropriate skills and judgment, b) should have proof of certification in the use of the complementary/adjunct therapy if available, and c) consider the continuing education requirements to maintain competency to utilize the intervention.

Christine would also be encouraged to explore whether EMDR would be appropriate for her client. As part of the informed consent process Christine would review the agreed upon goals and work completed to date with the client, gain insight into why the client feels the current treatment is not working, and assist the client in identifying his priorities and goals for continued engagement in social work services. Christine would let the client know what her experience has been in using EMDR, the

benefits and risks of this therapeutic approach, alternative treatment options that Christine can provide, and referral options. The client can then make an informed decision about which treatment plan is in his best interest; which may result in the termination of the social worker-client relationship. This is consistent with the ethical principle of client self-determination.

Scenario 3

Amy RSW, completed her MSW degree 7 years ago, and has recently decided to leave her place of employment and start a private practice. She has 30 active clients and wonders what her ethical obligations are with regards to termination of the social worker-client relationships.

In considering her ethical responsibilities, it would be important for Amy to reflect on the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics.

Value 1: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

- Social workers respect the client's right to make choices based on voluntary, informed consent.

Value 3: Service to Humanity

- Social workers place the needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity.

Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice

- Social workers demonstrate and promote the qualities of honesty, reliability, impartiality and diligence in their professional practice.

A reflection on the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice, with a focus on the following sections would also be important:

- Social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority, with due regard to the respective interests of others (1.1.1).
- Social workers promote the self-determination and autonomy of clients, actively encouraging them to make informed decisions on their behalf (1.3.1)
- When obligated to interrupt, or terminate a professional relationship, social workers advise clients regarding the discontinuation of service and if possible, ensure their referral to another professional (1.8.6).

A primary consideration for Amy is the best interests of her clients. Given that she is still working with her current employer, it would be recommended that Amy consult with her manager/supervisor

regarding her resignation and develop a plan for terminating with her clients. Through this termination process, Amy would be encouraged to review the initial social worker-client contract, and connect with clients about the services they can continue to avail of through her current employer, their right to terminate and not receive additional services, and information on referral options. This should be documented in the client file. In addition, Amy has an ethical responsibility to ensure that her clinical records are up to date to facilitate continuity of care for clients as per the NLASW (2014) *Standards for Social Work Recording*.

As Amy transitions to private practice, it would also be important for her to consider her ethical obligations to her current employer as outlined in the following sections from the CASW (2005) *Guidelines for Ethical Practice*.

- Social workers do not solicit clients for their private practice from their colleagues or their place of work, unless there is a request for social workers to do so (5.2.1).
- Subject to 5.2.1, social workers may accept clients from their workplace when the workplace does not provide a similar service or in accordance with established workplace guidelines regarding such referrals (5.2.2).

Amy should exercise caution in soliciting clients from her workplace to her private practice, unless this has been agreed to and documented by her current employer. This is to ensure transparency and the avoidance of perceived or actual conflicts of interest.

Terminations & Ethical Decision-Making

Terminations in social work practice can be relatively straightforward to highly complex. It is therefore important that social workers reflect on the termination process and ethical responsibilities. The following guidelines may be helpful to social workers as termination is explored in practice.

- Acknowledge the importance of closure and terminations in social work practice.
- Integrate conversations about the termination of the social worker-client relationship in the informed consent process.
- Document all decisions and actions related to termination in the client record (i.e., reasons for termination, summary of progress (or lack of progress) and referral/resources offered).
- When ending the professional relationship because treatment goals are not being met, clearly articulate and discuss this with the client and explore alternative options (i.e., referral to another professional).
- Consult with a colleague or manager when complex termination matters are being addressed.
- Maintain boundaries and keep relationships professional.

References/Resources

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