

CODE OF ETHICS

OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
SOCIAL WORKERS



2021 Amendments

*NASW Code of Ethics: Self-Care
and Cultural Competence*

By Andrea Murray

In 2020, the social work profession was faced with new and unique challenges as frontline responders to both the global COVID-19 pandemic and the racial and social justice crisis, all demanding drastic systemic changes. NASW has risen to the occasion by taking action in real time to address the needs of the profession through social media forums, the development of resources to guide the profession, social and political advocacy efforts, and now amendments to the NASW *Code of Ethics*. One of the many ways the Association has seized the moment has been by listening to the voices of social work advocates who raised concerns about key elements of ethical social work practice that needed to be included in the NASW *Code of Ethics*.

The NASW's *Code of Ethics* is a living document that responds to social change to meet the needs of the profession. While the core values and principles that have historically been the benchmarks of the profession are relatively grounded, there are times when emergent societal changes require clearer language or a different emphasis on integral ethical responsibilities that serve to guide the way forward for social workers. Making an amendment to the NASW *Code of Ethics* requires a formal review process

governed by NASW Bylaws and approval by the Association's Delegate Assembly. After careful deliberation via the Delegate Assembly review process, two significant amendments were made to the NASW *Code of Ethics* in 2020 and 2021: the inclusion of self-care language to the Purpose and Ethical Principles sections of the *Code* and the reinstatement of the term "Cultural Competence" as it relates to social workers' ethical responsibilities described in standard 1.05 in the NASW *Code of Ethics*.

Advocates for the inclusion of self-care language in the NASW *Code of Ethics* raised the matter of self-care as a key component of ethical and professional excellence. This aligns with empirical research demonstrating that proactive self-care reduces the likelihood of impairment and enhances job satisfaction and professional longevity. They compellingly argued that explicit inclusion of the value of self-care in the NASW *Code of Ethics* would serve as a powerful preventive function and support a healthy culture among social workers.

As such, the Code has been amended to include new language in the Purpose section that reads:

Professional self-care is paramount for competent and ethical social work practice. Professional demands, challenging workplace climates, and exposure to trauma warrant that social workers maintain personal and professional health, safety, and integrity. Social work organizations, agencies, and educational institutions are encouraged to promote organizational policies, practices, and materials to support social workers' self-care.

Changes to the Ethical Principles section of the *Code* also took into account that self-care also protects social workers' capacity to support the values of integrity.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLE: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.

Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers should take measures to care for themselves professionally and personally. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

In 2020, NASW's Delegate Assembly also deliberated proposed changes to standard 1.05, formerly "Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity." These recommendations for change were proposed by the National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity (NCORED). The 2017 revision to the NASW *Code of Ethics* changed the title of standard 1.05 from "Cultural Competence" to "Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity." NCORED was instrumental in bringing to the fore concerns that this change diluted the spirit and commitment of this standard during a time when culturally diverse populations in the United States and globally are demanding a renewed commitment across professions and systems that refocuses an emphasis on equality and an improved quality of life and care for all. Moreover, the reinstatement of the title, "Cultural Competence," aligns with NASW's and other allied professional organizational language around innovative and expert cultural competence frameworks and approaches.

The NCORED proposal for changes resulted in the approval of language amendments including the reinstatement of standard 1.05 as "Cultural Competence" and more emphatic language that operationalizes how cultural competence is demonstrated.

1.05 Cultural Competence

- (a) Social workers should **demonstrate understanding of** culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.
- (b) Social workers should **demonstrate** knowledge **that guides practice with** clients of various cultures and be able to demonstrate skills in the provision of culturally informed services that empower marginalized individuals and groups. Social workers must take **action against oppression, racism, discrimination, and inequities, and acknowledge** personal privilege.
- (c) **Social workers should demonstrate awareness and cultural humility by engaging in critical self-reflection (understanding their own bias and engaging in self-correction); recognizing clients as experts of their own culture; committing to life-long learning; and holding institutions accountable for advancing cultural humility.**
- (d) Social workers should obtain education about **and demonstrate understanding of** the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical ability.
- (e) Social workers who provide electronic social work services should be aware of cultural and socioeconomic differences among **clients' use of** and access to electronic technology **and seek to prevent such potential barriers.** Social workers should assess cultural, environmental, economic, mental or physical ability, linguistic, and other issues that may affect the delivery or use of these services.

It has been said that crisis can be seen as an opportunity. NASW endeavors to seize the opportunities to reflect on where we are, who we are, and how we as an Association and profession can be catalysts for change. These significant amendments to the NASW *Code of Ethics* equip the profession with the guidance necessary to continue to be leaders, educators, healers, and advocates for social well-being.