

# Introduction to Ethics

As a substance abuse prevention professional, you regularly face situations that involve ethics. Often it is clear how to act ethically. But in some situations you may not be aware of your ethical responsibility, or know how to respond ethically. While laws and policies are a good starting point for making ethical decisions, you are likely to face many situations where the right ethical response is not clearly prescribed by regulations.

*Ethics in Prevention* can help you make ethical choices in your work every day. This training describes the six principles in the Prevention Code of Ethics, illustrated by realistic examples designed to enhance your understanding of each principle. It also introduces a decision-making process designed to help you apply this code to a variety of ethical dilemmas.

## Ethics Defined

We each have our own set of **values** that influence the ethical decisions we make in our daily lives. Similarly, the prevention profession has a distinct set of **principles** based on moral values that are intended to guide the actions we take and the **ethical** decisions we make in our work.

The diagram below depicts the relationship between some of these key terms.



**Values** are deeply held ideals, convictions, and principles. Your values are influenced by many things, including your culture and where you live. Here are some examples: work hard, family first, and loyalty.

**Principles** reflect the moral values of an individual or group of people about right and wrong conduct. Here are some examples: Do no harm, turn the other cheek, do the greatest good for those in greatest need.

**Ethics** are agreed-upon codes of behavior based on distinct sets of principles.

## When Values Compete or Conflict

Acting ethically is straightforward in situations where values are *complementary*. For example, if you value success and hard work, you are likely to work late to meet a deadline. However, in some situations values *compete* or *conflict*. For example, if you are a parent with a sick child and a deadline at work, the value you place on putting your family's needs first may conflict with the value you place on hard work. In this situation, making a decision about what to do may be difficult.

Knowing what to do—and how to respond—when your personal and/or professional values conflict isn't always easy or clear. A personal or professional code of ethics can help individuals make difficult decisions.

## Prevention Code of Ethics: Six Principles

Certain values form the foundation of the prevention profession. These moral values were organized into six principles that comprise the *Code of Ethical Conduct for Prevention Professionals* (referred to as the Prevention Code of Ethics throughout this training). Originally developed by the former National Association of Prevention Professionals and Advocates, this ethical code was later revised and formalized by the Prevention Think Tank. Then in 2011 it was adopted by the International Certification & Reciprocity Consortium.

The six principles in the Code are:

1. Non-Discrimination
2. Competence
3. Integrity
4. Nature of Services
5. Confidentiality
6. Ethical Obligations for Community and Society

## Prevention Code of Ethics in Action

The Prevention Code of Ethics can help prevention professionals avoid acting unethically. There are two types of unethical behavior:

- *Commission* is saying or doing something that is unethical (e.g., using images in your training manual without permission from the author/creator).
- *Omission* is failing to take any action when you see something unethical happen (e.g., not saying or doing anything after realizing that a colleague did not cite the source of the data used in his presentation).

But the Prevention Code of Ethics does more than just prevent unethical behavior. The six principles in this code are intended to create a climate of respect, and to make sure professionals act in ways that protect the physical, mental, and emotional safety of those involved in or served by prevention activities. You can think of the Prevention Code of Ethics as a guide for professional conduct. It can help you:

- Proactively make good, ethical choices every day in your prevention work; and
- Respond appropriately to the ethical dilemmas you face as prevention professionals.