Decision Making: Ethical Aspects

What We Know

› Ethics is the practice and study of what an individual’s conduct and behaviors should be in regard to one’s self, other humans, and the environment. Ethics is a system of moral conduct, the principles that guide behaviors and actions, and the reasoning that determines what is right and what is wrong\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^2\)\(^,\)\(^3\)

› Applied ethics is the application of normative ethical theory and decision making to everyday conflicts. Ethical decision making often requires some level of risk to solve problems. Ethical decision making can be a complex and difficult process in the healthcare industry because healthcare providers in different roles may have differing ethical responsibilities. The purpose of ethical decision making is to find the best solution to satisfy most individuals\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^2\)\(^,\)\(^5\)\(^,\)\(^6\)

› Healthcare providers must have adequate knowledge of ethical principles and effective skills to make appropriate decisions in healthcare and resolve ethical problems. Difficulty in making ethical decisions often arises from lack of formal education about problem solving. Ethics committees, institutional review boards (IRBs), and professional codes of ethics are available to assist healthcare providers in making decisions in difficult circumstances (e.g., patient end-of-life issues)\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^2\)\(^,\)\(^5\)\(^,\)\(^6\)

› Key principles of ethical decision making in the healthcare setting include the following:\(^3\)\(^,\)\(^5\)
  • Respect for other individuals; this is the most fundamental and universal principle
  • Autonomy, which promotes self-determination and freedom of choice
  • Confidentiality of and respect for privileged information
  • Utility, which is the concept that the good of many outweighs the wants or needs of an individual
  • Paternalism, which is when one individual assumes the right to make decisions for another individual; this may limit an individual’s freedom of choice and is usually only justified to prevent the individual from harm
  • Beneficence, which is the action of doing good. For example, the practice of providing safe, high-quality healthcare in a work environment that is free from workplace violence and conflict is resolved in a constructive manner
  • Nonmaleficence, which promotes processes to prevent violence and to minimize conflict
  • Justice to uphold the standards and principles of behavior and fairness
  • Veracity (i.e., the obligation to tell the truth)
  • Fidelity (i.e., remaining faithful to commitments and keeping promises)

› Healthcare providers, particularly nurses, encounter circumstances in which they are expected to simultaneously act in the best interest of patients, families, other colleagues, and/or the healthcare organization. Moral uncertainty (also known as moral conflict) arises when an individual is uncertain which moral principles or values apply in a given situation. Moral distress results from an individual’s recognition of necessary ethical actions in the workplace conflicted by the inability to correct ethical dilemmas. Sources of moral distress can be personal, organizational, environmental, and/or interpersonal. Unresolved moral distress leads to decreased integrity and job satisfaction and undermining of personal and professional work ethics\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^2\)\(^,\)\(^6\)
Moral courage is the ability and willingness to speak up and make ethical decisions. Ethical nursing leaders are characterized by their values, integrity, conduct, and moral virtues. Nursing leaders have the responsibility to set a moral example for others and to create a supportive environment to promote acts of moral courage. Nursing leaders should be proactive to alleviate an ethical dilemma and follow models of ethical decision making. Accountability, professional responsibility, honesty, and proactivity are necessary traits for ethical nursing leadership. Ethical decision making in nursing involves the following: 

- Accepting that some ambiguity will be part of the decision-making process
- Accepting that negative outcomes can occur in ethical decision making despite practicing high-quality problem-solving skills
- Demonstrating the willingness to take risks
- Acting as a role model and following the American Nurses Association (ANA) Code of Ethics and professional standards
- Communicating expected ethical standards for behavior in a clear manner
- Practicing self-awareness of one’s own values, rights, duties and goals

The most common frameworks for ethical decision making to assist individuals in self-awareness of personal values and beliefs include the following basic approaches: 

- Duty-based reasoning is the concept that some decisions must be made because of the duty to perform a specific action or refrain from doing something. For example, nurses have a duty to report suspected cases of child abuse to protect the child
- Rights-based reasoning is the belief that each individual has basic claims or entitlements with which there should be no interference. For example, patients have a right to decide if they are a full resuscitation code status or a do not resuscitate status
- Utilitarianism is the ability to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This diminishes the needs and wants of the individual. For example, a nursing leader may have to decide how to best allocate funds to support continuing education for all staff members rather than one or two people
- Intuitionism is the ability to consider each scenario on a case-by-case basis to identify goals, duties, and rights. The individual is guided on intuition and subjectivity; some ethical theorists caution that intuitionism has a potential for bias

High quality ethical decisions are a result of structured problem solving, adequate data collection, and examination of alternatives. The nursing process of assessing, diagnosing, planning, implementing, and evaluating is appropriate to use as an ethical decision-making model even though it was not specifically designed as such

Clinical self-empowerment in ethically challenging situations may be achieved through time management, knowledge development, patient assessment, and need identification are key factors in conscience-based care delivery in nursing.

- In nursing practice, respect for human rights, sensitivity, and dignified care delivery all encompass the ability to provide conscience-based patient care, while helping nurses develop their professional roles, adhere closely to ethical standards, and provide them with a sense of calm and job satisfaction
- In a qualitative study on conscience-based care delivery on twelve hospital nurses recruited from four teaching hospitals in Urmia, Iran, researchers reported clinical self-empowerment and attempt to deliver care beyond the routines as strategies for conscience-based care delivery, recommending mentorship programs to develop time management, interpersonal communication, patient assessment, and clinical task performance skills, particularly among novice and beginner nurses

Collaborating with peers in the ethical decision-making process contributes to an increased awareness of one’s own ethical values and the ethical values of peers. The author of a systematic review of 20 studies on ethical decision-making models created an integrated model for nurses to resolve ethical healthcare problems. The integrated ethical decision-making model incorporates the following six steps:

- State an ethical problem in terms of ethical values rather than action-oriented terms. Nurses should consider ethical principles and values separately from non-ethical, practical problems (e.g., communication difficulties)
- Collect additional information and analyze the ethical problem. This step requires identifying the involved parties and what information is required from whom
  - Involved parties can include the following groups: patients, family members, healthcare professionals, and environments (e.g., an institute, society, associations of healthcare professionals)
  - The types of information required for ethical decision making includes: biological aspects (e.g., diagnosis, treatment), psychological aspects (e.g., values, religion), social or historical aspects (e.g., autonomy), and/or goals, preferences, and values related to the issue with all involved parties
• Develop alternatives, analyze, compare, and share available information with all involved parties. Ethical decision making commonly requires consideration of ethical principles, societal values, legal regulations, code of ethics, religious beliefs, guidelines and policy, personal beliefs, and societal values
• Select the best alternative and justify and clearly communicate the decision to all involved parties
• Develop strategies to successfully implement the chosen alternative and take action; all healthcare parties should actively participate in this step regardless of whether the final decision is one that was originally intended
• Evaluate the outcomes of the action and the decision-making process. Evaluate at the individual, institutional, and community or societal levels to prevent similar problems in the future. In some cases, if the outcome is not achieved, the process needs to be repeated to consider other strategies

What We Can Do
› Become knowledgeable about the components for ethical decision making; share this information with your colleagues
› Participate in a formal educational program for problem solving and applied ethics for decision making
› Adhere to your professional codes of ethics and practice moral courage in ethical decision making
› Consult with your organization’s ethics committee and/or IRB for assistance in making ethical decisions, as appropriate
› Collaborate to promote ethical decision-making in your organization and
   • identify sources of moral distress
   • participate in professional activities to increase your knowledge base, awareness, and understanding of moral distress
   • implement models to foster ethical decision making in your organization
   • create a supportive work environment for your colleagues and staff members

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<th>Coding Matrix</th>
<th>References are rated using the following codes, listed in order of strength:</th>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Published meta-analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td>Published systematic or integrative literature review</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Published research (randomized controlled trial)</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>Published research (not randomized controlled trial)</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Case histories, case studies</td>
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<td>G</td>
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References