Here are a few key points regarding ethical decisions.

- Responsible practice requires that you:
  - base your actions on informed, sound, and responsible judgment
  - consult with colleagues or seek supervision
  - keep your knowledge and skills current
  - engage in a continual process of self-examination
  - remain open

- In making ethical decisions, as much as possible and when appropriate, include your client in this ethical decision-making process.

- Clients need enough information about the therapeutic process to be able to make informed choices.
  - The informed consent process begins with the intake interview and continues for the duration of the therapeutic relationship.
  - The aim is to involve clients in a collaborative partnership.

- The key is to make ethical decisions with clients, not simply for them. Get clients actively involved in the process to the extent possible and appropriate. Respecting the autonomy of your clients implies that you do not decide for clients, nor do you foster dependent attitudes and behaviors.

### Eight Steps in Making Ethical Decisions

Ethical decision making should be a collaborative process between client and counselor, rather than a counselor making decisions for the client. Below are the steps, with suggested questions, to assist you in thinking through an ethical dilemma. This is one of several decision-making models which can be utilized. The steps taken may not always follow the same order shown and steps may be repeated several times in the process.

1. **Identify the problem or dilemma.**
   - Does a problem or dilemma actually exist?
   - Is this an ethical, legal, moral, professional, or clinical problem?
   - Is it a combination of more than one of these?
   - How can you know the nature of the problem?
   - Would you consult at this early stage as you are identifying the problem?
   - How might you begin the process of consultation with your client about the nature of the problem?

2. **Identify the potential issues involved.**
   - How might you best evaluate the rights, responsibilities, and welfare of all those involved and those who are affected by the decision, including your own welfare as a practitioner?
   - How can you best promote your client's independence and self-determination?
   - What actions have the least chance of bringing harm to your client?
   - What decision will best safeguard the client's welfare?
   - How can you create a trusting and collaborative climate where your clients can find their own answers?
   - What principles can you use in prioritizing the potential issues involved in this situation?
   - Are there any ways to encourage the client to participate in identifying and determining potential ethical issues?

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3. Review the relevant ethical codes.
   - What guidance can you find on the specific problem under review by consulting with the professional codes?
   - Are your values in agreement with the specific ethical code in question?
   - How clear and specific are the codes on the specific area under consideration?
   - Are the codes consistent with applicable state laws?

4. Know the applicable laws and regulations.
   - Are there any laws or regulations that have a bearing on the situation under consideration?
   - What are the specific and relevant state and federal laws that apply to the ethical dilemma?
   - What are the rules, regulations, and policies of the agency or institution where you work?

5. Obtain consultation.
   - Do you know where to go to obtain consultation with professionals who are knowledgeable about ethical issues?
   - Assuming that you will consult with a colleague or a supervisor, what would you expect from this consultation?
   - What kinds of questions do you want to ask of those with whom you consult?
   - With whom do you seek consultation? Do you consult only with those who share your orientation, or do you look for consultants with different perspectives?
   - How can you use the consultation process as an opportunity to test the justification of a course of action you are inclined to take?
   - What kinds of information do you document when you consult?
   - When you do make use of a consultation process, do you inform your client about this? Are there any ways you might include the client in this consultation process?

6. Consider possible and probable courses of action.
   - What are some ways that you can brainstorm many possible courses of action?
   - Do you have a systematic method for analyzing ethical obligations and possible courses of action?
   - Are you willing to involve your client in the discussion of the various courses of action?
   - What might you document pertaining to discussions with your client about probable courses of action?

7. Enumerate the consequences of various decisions.
   - How can you best evaluate the potential consequences of each course of action, before implementing a particular action plan?
   - Are you willing to involve your client in the discussion of the implications of each course of action for the client?
   - What ethical principles can you use as a framework for evaluating the consequences of a given course of action?
   - Examine the consequences of various decisions for your client, for you as counselor, and for the profession in general.

8. Decide on what appears to be the best course of action.
   - After carefully considering all the information you have gathered, how do you know what seems to be the best action to take?
   - Do you solicit the input of your client in making this decision at this phase?
   - Once you have formulated a plan of action, do you ask for feedback from a colleague or supervisor?
   - Once the course of action has been implemented, what are some ways that you might evaluate the course of action?
   - Are you willing to follow up to determine the outcomes and see if further action is necessary?