

# Ethical Decision-Making Guide for Peer Support Specialists

## Introduction

Ethical dilemmas are a natural part of peer support work. Peer specialists often encounter situations where multiple ethical principles come into play, requiring careful **consideration, consultation, and structured decision-making**. This guide outlines a **five-step ethical decision-making model** to help peer workers make thoughtful, informed, and ethical choices in challenging situations.

By using this guide, peer specialists can navigate ethical concerns while **maintaining professional integrity, upholding peer values, and ensuring the best possible outcomes for those they serve**.

## The Five-Step Ethical Decision-Making Model

The following five-step process provides a structured approach to making ethical decisions in peer support.

### Step 1: Identify the Ethical Issue

- Clearly define the ethical dilemma.
- Determine which ethical principles are involved.
- Consider how the decision impacts the peer, the peer worker, and the community.
  - **Example:** A peer support worker learns that a peer is engaging in unsafe behaviors but has requested confidentiality. The worker must decide whether to respect confidentiality or prioritize safety.

#### Key Questions to Ask:

- What is the **ethical conflict**?
- Which **peer support values** are involved?
- Who could be affected by this decision?

### Step 2: Gather Relevant Information

- Review ethical guidelines, organizational policies, and laws.
- Seek additional context—consider the peer’s background and unique needs.
- Identify the potential risks and consequences of different actions.

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- **Example:** A peer worker supporting someone in recovery from opioid use disorder consults **confidentiality policies and harm reduction principles** before deciding whether to share concerns with other providers.

#### **Key Questions to Ask:**

- What policies or ethical standards apply?
- Are there **legal reporting requirements** (e.g., mandatory reporting for harm)?
- What are the potential risks of different choices?

### **Step 3: Consider Possible Actions**

- Brainstorm multiple ethical solutions before deciding.
- Weigh the benefits and drawbacks of each course of action.
- Evaluate each choice in relation to ethical peer support principles.
  - **Example:** A peer worker supporting a peer in crisis considers **three possible actions**:
    1. Respect confidentiality and provide emotional support.
    2. Encourage the peer to seek additional support while maintaining trust.
    3. Break confidentiality to ensure immediate safety.

#### **Key Questions to Ask:**

- What **options exist** for resolving this dilemma?
- What are the ethical implications of each choice?
- Which decision best aligns with **peer support values and ethical standards**?

### **Step 4: Consult & Make a Decision**

- Seek **supervision or peer consultation** for additional perspectives.
- Choose the **most ethical and professional course of action**.
- Communicate the decision **transparently and ethically**.
  - **Example:** A peer worker discusses an ethical dilemma with their **supervisor or ethics review group** to ensure the decision is well-informed and aligned with best practices.

#### **Key Questions to Ask:**

- Have I **sought guidance** from a trusted supervisor or mentor?
- Does this decision align with **organizational policies and peer ethics**?
- How can I **explain my decision transparently** while maintaining professionalism?

### **Step 5: Evaluate & Reflect**

- Review the outcome and its impact.

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- Identify lessons learned to improve future decision-making.
- Consider how to strengthen ethical decision-making skills over time.
  - **Example:** After resolving an ethical dilemma, a peer worker **reflects on the outcome** and identifies areas for professional growth. They discuss lessons learned with a supervisor and consider training opportunities to strengthen ethical decision-making.

**Key Questions to Ask:**

- Was this the **best possible decision** under the circumstances?
- What did I learn from this experience?
- How can I **improve my ethical decision-making process** moving forward?

## Best Practices for Ethical Decision-Making in Peer Support

- **Always prioritize peer autonomy**—empower, don't dictate.
- **Seek supervision and consultation**—never make difficult ethical decisions alone.
- **Follow confidentiality guidelines**—but recognize when safety takes priority.
- **Maintain professional boundaries**—even in complex peer relationships.
- **Continue ethical learning**—engage in ongoing training and professional development.

## Ethical Decision-Making in Action: Case Studies

### Case Study 1: Confidentiality vs. Duty to Protect

**Scenario:** A peer worker is supporting an individual who has expressed thoughts of relapse. The peer asks the worker **not to tell their treatment provider**, stating they want to figure things out on their own. The worker is concerned for the peer's safety but does not want to violate their trust.

**Applying the 5-Step Model:**

1. **Identify the Issue** – Confidentiality vs. duty to protect.
2. **Gather Information** – Review ethical guidelines on autonomy and harm reduction.
3. **Consider Actions** – Weigh options: honoring confidentiality, encouraging self-disclosure, or escalating concerns.
4. **Consult & Decide** – Discuss with a supervisor and choose the most ethical approach.

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5. **Evaluate & Reflect** – Review the decision’s impact and refine future responses.

### **Case Study 2: Personal Beliefs vs. Peer Autonomy**

**Scenario:** A peer worker is supporting a peer who chooses to follow a harm reduction approach, but the worker personally believes in an abstinence-only recovery model. The worker struggles to remain nonjudgmental when discussing medication-assisted treatment options.

#### **Applying the 5-Step Model:**

1. **Identify the Issue** – Balancing personal beliefs with professional ethics.
2. **Gather Information** – Review ethical principles of autonomy and nonjudgmental support.
3. **Consider Actions** – Explore ways to support the peer without bias.
4. **Consult & Decide** – Seek guidance from a supervisor to ensure ethical support.
5. **Evaluate & Reflect** – Assess how to improve future nonjudgmental support.

### **Case Study 3: Boundary Challenges in Peer Support**

**Scenario:** A peer worker is approached by a peer they support who asks to borrow money for transportation to a meeting. The worker feels compassionate but is concerned about crossing professional boundaries.

#### **Applying the 5-Step Model:**

1. **Identify the Issue** – Maintaining professional boundaries while offering support.
2. **Gather Information** – Review ethical policies on financial assistance and peer roles.
3. **Consider Actions** – Explore ethical alternatives (e.g., connecting the peer with resources).
4. **Consult & Decide** – Seek advice from supervision on handling boundary issues.
5. **Evaluate & Reflect** – Reflect on strategies to reinforce professional boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

Ethical decision-making is an **ongoing process** that requires **careful thought, professional consultation, and adherence to ethical guidelines**. By using this structured approach, peer workers can confidently navigate ethical dilemmas while maintaining integrity, professionalism, and trust with the peers they support.