

# THE ETHICS OF COMPETENCE

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# What is Ethical Competence?

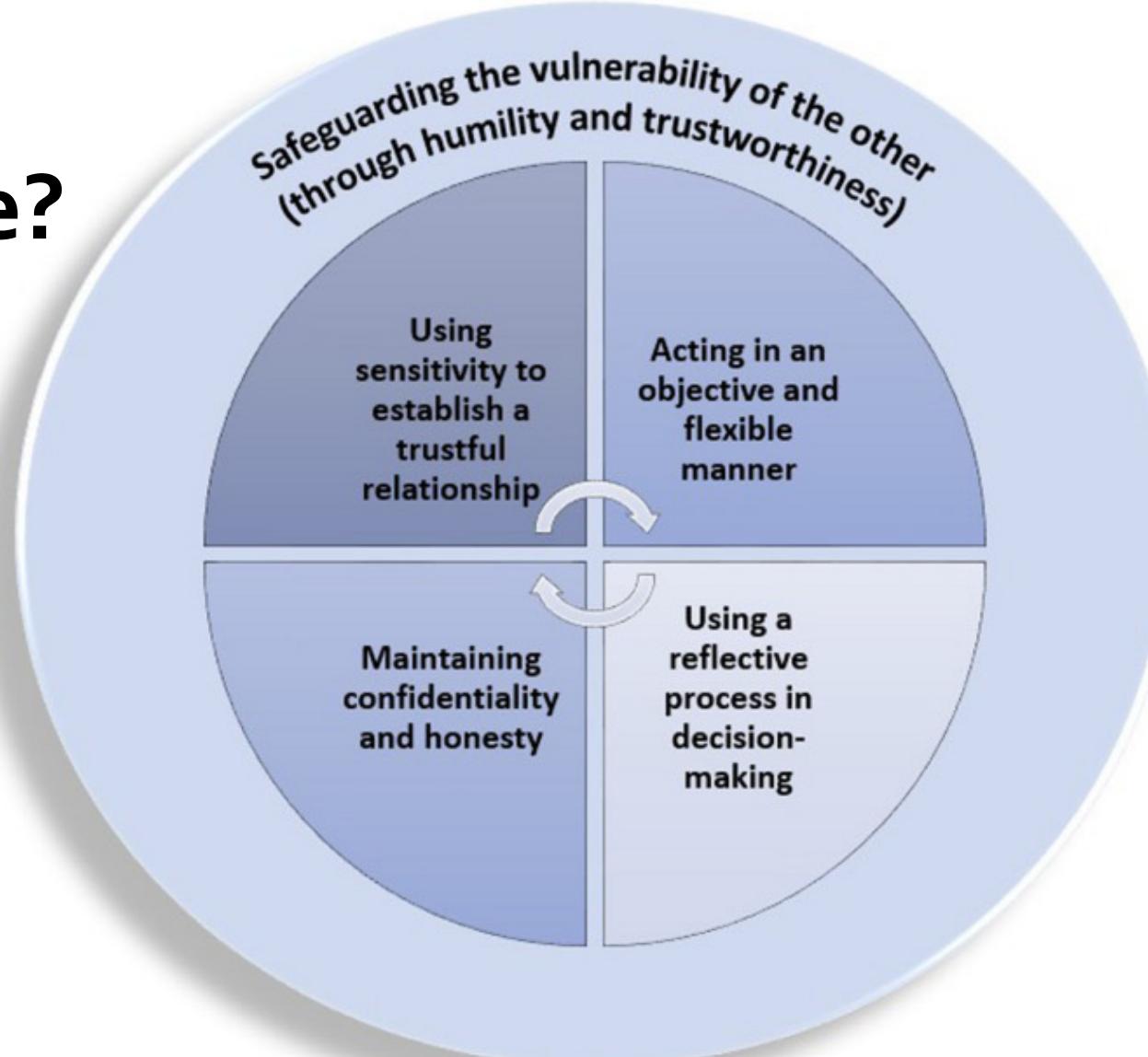
- It's merging ethics and competence.
  - Both can be viewed separately, or there can be an understanding that competence may be a requirement of ethical practice.
- According to Haas and Malouf (2005), "Competence is defined as possessing the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to effectively provide needed professional services and having the ability to implement them effectively."
- Hemberg and Hemberg (2020) report that "Ethics refer to the science or study of morals, ethical principles, and decision-making skills and concerns the value and principles related to human conduct."
- Jomsri et al. (2005) found that ethical competence includes the ability to identify value conflicts through the application of ethical dimensions. They further state that it requires local reasoning and an individual's ability to choose between values.

# What is Ethical Competence? (cont.)

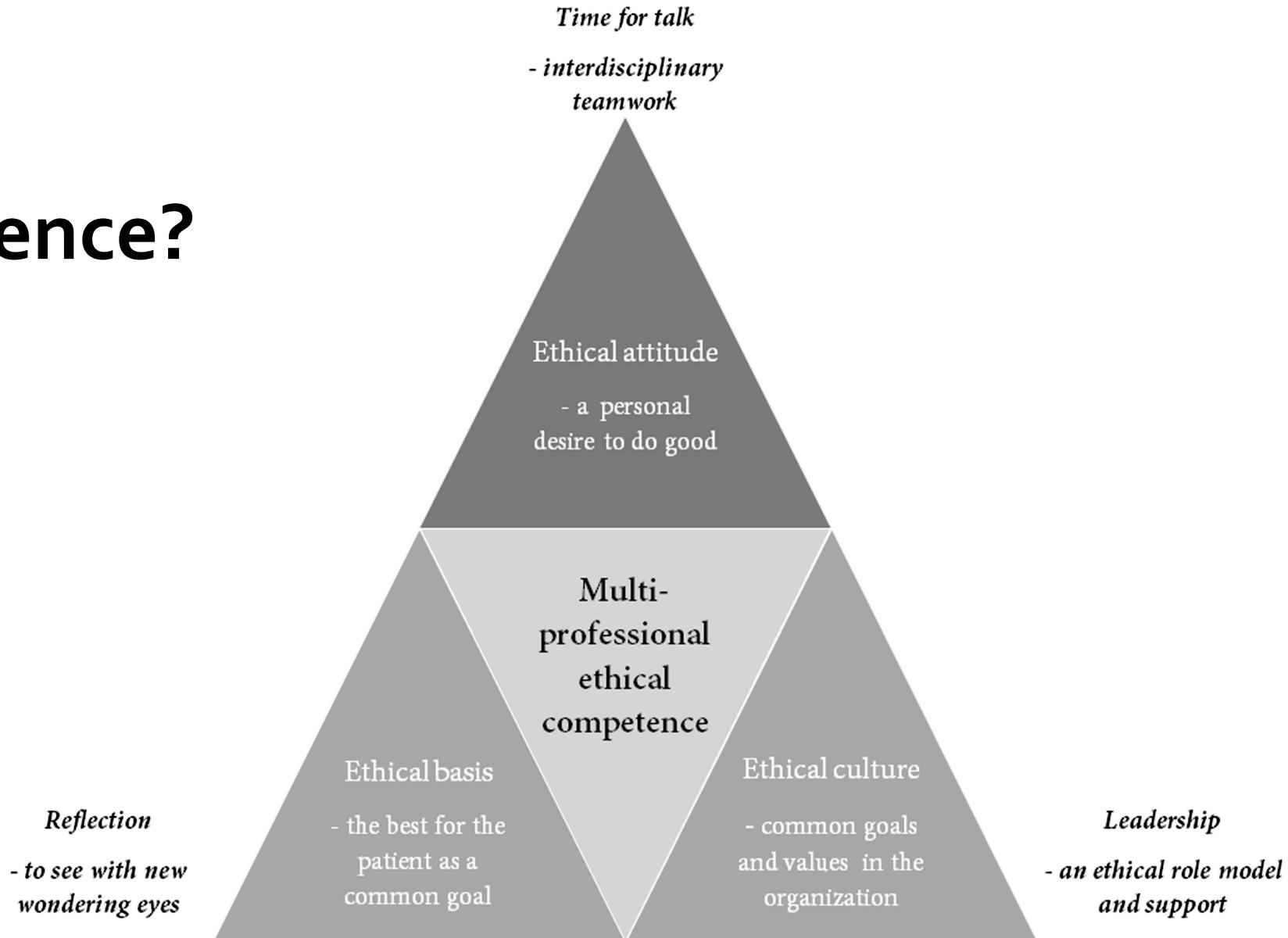
- Koskinen et al. (2022) asserts, “Ethical competence has a strong link to the core of caring ethics and a deeper personal value base and attitude. Ethical competence involves the whole culture and is seen as a shared value base and a responsibility to do the best for the patient as a multi-professional team and organization. Ethical competence becomes active in healthcare practice by opening up for meaningful multi-professional talks and reflections.”



# What is Ethical Competence? (cont.)

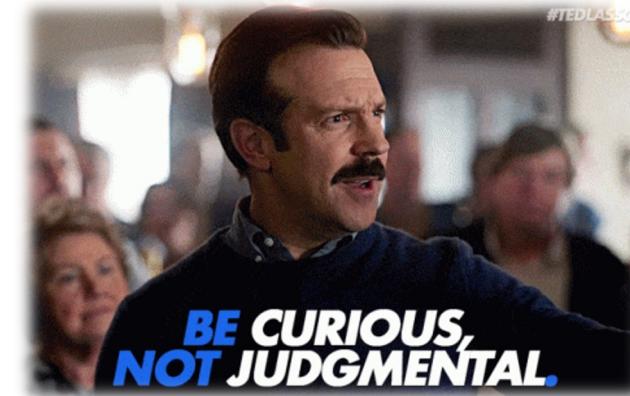


# What is Ethical Competence? (cont.)



# What Does Ethical Competence Involve?

- The World Health Organization's Global Competency Model (2016) state there are several core qualities linked to ethical competence:
  - Active listening
  - Understanding
  - Responsibility
  - Collegiality
  - Identifying conflicts
  - Respect
  - Confidentiality
  - Personal Values
- Ethical Competence often involves understanding your professional code of ethics, familiarity with standards of care and organizational practices, remaining current in areas you practice, accepting support from others, your integrity, ongoing knowledge building, and a willingness to do good and right by others.



# Why is Ethical Competence Important?

- Hemberg and Hemberg (2020) state, "Ethical competence is a fundamental qualification or capacity that healthcare professionals need in daily practice to identify the ethical dimensions inherent in their decision-making.
  - They continue, "Ethical competence can help healthcare professionals find the best possible solution for a patient and is thereby an essential component of high-quality of care.
- Ethics are at the heart of our practice and are what set our professions apart from others (they can also legitimize our professions to the public and each other).
- Whether organizationally or professionally, many of us have an expectation for ethics and a level of competence in practice.

# How Do We Maintain Ethical Competence?

- Ethics often require self-monitoring of competence.
  - It's important to remember to use supervision and consultation.
- Licensing boards may require some proof of ongoing competence (continuing education, supervision, testing, etc.).
- Agencies may require training and other activities to demonstrate ongoing competence.
- Accrediting agencies may require proof of competence for practices of an agency and the employees.
- When facing ethical dilemmas, we should be able to identify ethical concerns, balance the ethical and moral aspects of care, reflect on our own knowledge and actions, approach choices mindfully, and choose a path forward based off our best judgment.

# Flaws of How Ethical Competence is Approached

- Ethics often require professionals to self-monitor, but according to Barnett and Corcoran (2018), self-monitoring and self-awareness are often insufficient when ensuring ethical competence.
  - Research shows that the more impaired a professional's functioning is the less prepared they are to accurately assess for competence and ongoing ethical practice.
- Hemberg and Hemberg (2020) acknowledge that ethical competence is a "fundamental but complex concept."
  - It is acknowledged to be broad and universal, but in being so is also not noticeably distinct.
- Ethical competence may be viewed differently by different professions. Achieving balance and a path forward can be challenging when ethics of care are opposed.

# Steps to Ethical Decision Making

**Step 1:** Identify the Problem

**Step 2:** Identify the Potential Issues Involved

**Step 3:** Review Relevant Ethical Guidelines

**Step 4:** Know Relevant Laws and Regulations

**Step 5:** Obtain Consultation

**Step 6:** Consider Possible and Probable Courses of Action

**Step 7:** List the Consequences of the Probable Courses of Action

**Step 8:** Decide on What Appears to be the Best Course of Action



# AAMFT Code of Ethics (*related to Competence*)

- Professional competence in commitment to service, advocacy, and public participation is noted as essential to the character of the field and to the well-being of clients and their communities.
- Additional standards related to Competence are:
  - Standard III
    - Professional Competence and Integrity (3.1 through 3.12)
  - Standard IV
    - Responsibility to Students and Supervisees (4.4 Oversight of Supervisee Competence)
  - Standard VII
    - Professional Evaluations (7.3 Competence)
  - Standard IX
    - Advertising (9.7 Specialization)

# Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (*related to Competence*)

- Boundaries of Competence falls under the General Principle of Justice.
- Competence is largely addressed in Section 2.
  - 2.01 Boundaries of Competence
  - 2.02 Providing Services in Emergencies
  - 2.03 Maintaining Competence
  - 2.04 Bases for Scientific and Professional Judgments
  - 2.05 Delegation of Work to Others
  - 2.06 Personal Problems and Conflicts

# NBCC Code of Ethics (related to Competence)

- The NBCC identifies the importance of competence in practice.
- Competence is addressed in Professional Responsibilities (No. 7) related to multicultural counseling competence in practice.
- It also identifies competence as a core component of Counselor Education (Nos. 81-85).



# National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (related to Competence)

- Competence is noted as a core value of social work practice.
- There is a note that workers should maintain professional competence when using technology for communication.
- The ethical principle for competence states that Social Workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

## **Responsibilities to Clients:**

- 1.04 Competence
- 1.05 Cultural Competence

## **Responsibilities to Colleagues:**

- 2.01 (b) Respect
- 2.05 (b) Consultation
- 2.09 Incompetence of Colleagues

## **Responsibilities in Practice:**

- 3.01 (a) Supervision and Consultation
- 3.02 (a) Education and Training

## **Responsibilities as Professionals:**

- 4.01 Competence
- 4.06 (c) Misrepresentation

## **Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession:**

- 5.01 (c) Integrity of the Profession

## **Responsibilities to the Broader Society:**

- 6.04 (c) Social and Political Action

# Ethics During a Crisis

- Learn your agency policies and contacts for quick reference or recall.
- Know your Code of Ethics and licensing regulations.
- Know community resources and when to call first responders.
- Look back to Ethical Decision Making and the E-T-H-I-C Model.
- The context of crisis should always be part of your decision making, but does not change the steps or questions you should ask yourself if you feel there is an ethical gray area.
- There will always be ethical gray areas when dealing with complex populations and situations. In addition to the aforementioned systems and methods in place, consider asking yourself:
  - Is someone in immediate danger?
  - Is this course of action in the best interest of the client?
- You may need to take a step back to fully assess the situation.
- What is a crisis for one person is not to another--that doesn't make it any less of a crisis to the client. Listen, validate, and create a plan of action.



# What Causes Issues with Competence?

- We may be or feel isolated in our roles.
- We may not feel supported by our team and/or supervisors.
- Our work can often require more hours than we have in a day.
- We are in very challenging positions.
- We may not feel appreciated in our roles.
- The populations we serve often have clinically and socially complex needs.
- We may not acknowledge that we always have room for more growth.
- We may not have time or motivation to attend various trainings.
- Our environments can be dangerous, unsupportive, non-stop, etc.
- We may have allowed our boundaries to falter or crossed boundaries.

# What Happens When Competence Fails?

- We may cut corners to meet the demands of our work.
- Feelings of distress, burnout, dread, resentment, paranoia, etc. may set in.
- We become more prone to isolation.
- It can leave us open to identify with our clients more than our peers or supervisors.
- We may become challenging to work with.
- What once may have been ethical decision-making and conduct has slowly or suddenly ventured into being unethical.



# How Do We Remain Competent?

- Practicing self-care and wellness activities
- Investing in trainings that are important to you
- Providing or seeking consultation
- Offering or receiving mentorship
- Enrolling in additional education (when necessary for your growth or practice)
- Engaging in supervision (being present as the supervisee or supervisor)
- Reading research, articles, books, publications, etc.
- Listening to podcasts, watching videos, etc.
- Attending therapy or other self-growth activities

# How Do We Support Those Receiving Care?

- Begin with Informed Consent
- Be objective, open-minded, and respectful
- Individualize our approaches and interventions
- Treat people with dignity and equity
- Ask questions, reflect statements, and find other ways to check-in
- Engage in active listening
- Support shared decision-making
- Demonstrate compassion, empathy, and competence

# How Do We Support Our Peers?

- Talk to them when you see or hear something that seems off for them.
- Invite them to join you for lunch, to join other colleagues for events, etc.
- If they're out of the office consider if any coverage would be helpful.
- Don't encourage them to become the consistent spokesperson for the group.
- Be available when they reach out or find a time you are available.
- Welcome new employees (whether on your team or not).
- Share your knowledge, your shortcuts, your resources, etc.
- Offer to help or support them when possible.
- Listen to more than their words.



# How Do We Support Supervisees?

- Know supervisees well enough to know when they are struggling or need support.
- Engage supervisees with warmth and genuine interest.
- Build and foster a supportive team environment.
- Create structure when it's requested or needed.
- Allow independence for those who thrive with less supervision.
- Know where strengths and limitations are within the team.
- Create roles, specialists, and/or become creative with work assignments.
- Avoid assuming just because you know something that everyone does.
- Be flexible and supportive when possible.
- Know the role of supervisees and step in when able or needed.

# How Do We Support Employees as an Organization?

- Empathize with and see the people working within your organization.
- Foster an environment that supports self-care, wellness, growth, collaboration, engagement, and investment.
- Consider that there is not one path to a promotion or raise.
- Move beyond organizational buzzwords and instead create that environment.
- Hold space by hosting listening sessions, sending out surveys, and most importantly being open to suggestions and how to put suggestions into practice.
- If a consultant is hired, listen to them.
- Hold leaders of the organization, departments, and programs accountable to learning how to be good leaders.
- See employees as the experts on client care and treat them as such.

# Steps When the Lack of Competence is Affecting Client Care

- Try to intervene early and/or speak with the individual when possible.
- If you have tried approaching them or feel it would not be received well (or would be unsafe) then consider approaching their supervisor.
- If the incident is serious, even if the supervisor has been informed, follow agency policy.
- Consider your accrediting, national, and licensing agencies state.
  - In the State of Missouri there is a complaint form for any of the professions registered with the [Division of Professional Registration](#).
  - Consider filing separately with a national organization if required by your profession.
- Please remember the importance of keeping these interactions professional. We do not want to further isolate or ostracize a peer or supervisee.

# In Summary: What to Do and What to Avoid

## DO

- Be open to ideas and to helping
- Consider what support others need on a human level
- Maintain clear, frequent, and honest communication
- Show genuine concern and investment in others
- Support workers engaging in self-care



## AVOID

- Being closed to or disinterested in ideas
- Only focusing on numbers and productivity
- Passive aggressive, passive, critical, and aggressive communication
- Inauthenticity / Toxic Positivity
- Lecturing people about self-care without supporting their self-care

# MINDFUL PERSPECTIVE™



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Mindful Perspective™ was created to help people and organizations find balance through developing perspective in the many facets of their lives and practice. The services offered are individual perspective building sessions, organizational consulting, and professional development/speaking engagements.



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# Questions?



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