

The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

Doing the Right Thing When Nobody is Looking: Ethics for Direct Support Professionals

By: John Raffaele

One of the most famous, and perhaps the “first-ever,” code of ethics is the one that is followed worldwide by physicians. It is called the Hippocratic Oath, and it basically says that the most important behavior to exercise in practicing the profession of medicine is to “do no harm” to another human being. Here is a translation of the actual text:

I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant:

I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.

I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures [that] are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism.

I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.

I will not be ashamed to say, "I know not," nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.

I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know. Most especially, must I tread with care in matters of life and death. If it is given to me to save a life, all thanks. But it may also be within my power to take a life; this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play at God.

I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems if I am to care adequately for the sick.

I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.

I will remember that I remain a member of society with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body, as well as the infirm.

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If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy life and art, be respected while I live and remembered with affection thereafter. May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling, and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help.ⁱ

There is a distinct correlation between this “first-ever” code of ethics and the one in which Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) must abide: The National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals Code of Ethics. All ethical codes serve as a road map, a guidebook, and ultimately a common standard base for behavior of the person who is practicing the profession. The historic Hippocratic Oath has a clear and direct message and, if used properly, will help all people who practice medicine to ultimately do the “right” thing.

Direct Support Professionals constantly act in situations and circumstances that warrant a guidebook. So many times, there are situations that involve split-second decision-making skills and instantaneous reaction. These situations could be life-threatening or could be fairly mundane and insignificant. Either way, the Direct Support Professional is obligated to act, behave, and perform their duty competently and ethically. Fortunately, the NADSP has created both a set of standard competencies and a code of ethics. Both of these bodies of information serve as proverbial “road maps” that assist the professional in making competent and ethically driven decisions.

Practicing the functions of direct support work without a Code of Ethics is much like driving in a car without a seatbelt. A seatbelt will, in most cases, protect the passenger from harm in the event of a collision. The collision may damage the car and may cause other ill-effects; however, the seatbelt serves as a limited but scientifically proven form of protection for the person using it.

Direct Support Professionals who use the code of ethics are protecting the people they support and themselves from undue harm in the event of a “collision” between what may be right or wrong in terms of action or circumstances that happen in the provision of direct support every day. Choosing the appropriate course of action in challenging situations is a common event in the day-to-day practice of direct support. The ‘seatbelt’ metaphor illustrates that using the NADSP Code of Ethics, a nationally validated and incredibly powerful tool to guide the DSP to be appropriate and ethical in their actions, will reduce the risk of harm to the people supported. There is never a guarantee a seatbelt will work in a collision, nor is there a guarantee that a DSPs decision will be the right one even if they use the Code. However, basing a decision in the light of the Code will more than likely allow for a positive, preferred outcome. Using a seatbelt is a good idea.

What are ethics?

Imagine that you are walking down a street nearby where you live. You are walking alone, and there are no people anywhere in sight. You are quietly strolling along, and you look down on the curbside only to see a red bookbag. You get closer, pick up the bag and see that it is full of cash. Contained in the bag is also an Apple Laptop MacBook computer and an MP3/iPod player. You go through the bag and see that there is no identifying information and no sign of ownership for this bag. Your interest in this red bag is now very high because you decide to count the money and realize there is \$3,000.00 in this mysterious red bag. There is NOBODY on the street with you. In the back of your mind, you are remembering that you have some serious bills this month and \$3,000.00 would do wonders for your bank account.

Many of you may think that there is an easy answer here. Well, there are several avenues to take but, the 'right' road would be to get the red bag returned to its owner by whatever means necessary. The reality for most humans is that we are good people. We are drawn to do the 'right' thing. However, the right thing can range in degree for as many people who would find that red bag. There is a small part of all of us that would be inclined to take the red bag, money, computer, and iPod and go home, pay our bills, surf the internet on our new computer while listening to the great music on our newly acquired iPod. We may even decide to buy a new green bag to reduce our guilt of finding that red bag!

What does this have to do with the profession of Direct Support? What is the connection of this 'red bag' situation in relation to ethics? The purpose of this series of articles is to answer these questions. Professional ethics must guide our daily activities while performing our profession, and the bookbag scenario describes the different levels of complexity in a seemingly obvious situation. This is the core of ethical decision making and practice: to decide on a path of highest virtue at times when we are the only people in sight and have no reference other than perhaps a codified listing of what to do and/or our own values, morals, and judgments given a particular situation. There are some people who would not even attempt to return the red bag. There are people that would go to the ends of the earth to find the owner of the red bookbag.

Ethics is defined in the Webster's Dictionary as, "A discipline dealing with good and evil and with moral duty." This sounds really intense and almost religious in nature. What would this definition have to do with the daily activities of a Direct Support Professional? With this in mind, the definition of ethics that fits more closely would be a derivative from a quote by Henry Ford. He once said, "Quality is defined by doing it right when nobody is looking." If we take that phrase and adjust it slightly, ethics is defined as, "**doing the right thing when nobody is looking.**" The spirit of Ford's idea about quality fits so well with the importance of acting, behaving, and doing the right thing when no one is observing. This is the essence of the NADSP Code of Ethics.

All professions are based upon a prevailing set of skill standards and competencies set by a governing/educational body of some sorts, or by a governmental Department of Labor, or possibly determined state to state, province to province, and so forth. All legitimate professions have a certificate or license/credential that allows the practice of the profession to be performed by those people that meet the requirements of the license/credential. Perhaps, most importantly, every profession is guided by a supreme and universally recognized code of ethics. Direct Support Professionals in North America are fortunate to have a code of ethics as written and adopted by the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP).

The NADSP ratified and adopted the DSP Code of Ethics in 2001 and has based many activities and functions in and around the Code. The NADSP National Credential was even created to ensure that Direct Support Professionals are held to uphold the Code, and that they can demonstrate skills and competencies commensurate with understanding the principles, and underlying theory and practice of Direct Support.

The reason that this code is important to utilize is that it has been created by a wide array of advisors, clinicians, academics, self-advocates, and Direct Support Professionals. The Code embodies the principles that guide individual's decisions and actions in their daily challenges and

adventures in supporting human beings. There are nine parts to the Code, and each one is utilized in concert with each other. One element of the code is not more important than another.

To this end, it is important for Direct Support Professionals to understand each part of the code so that they can employ the spirit and meaning of each one in the day-to-day interactions and scenarios that undoubtedly play out in the life of DSPs and people they support.

The NADSP has worked tirelessly to develop an organization and a professional affiliation that holds ethics as the core. Direct Support Professionals are involved in daily decision-making activities with the people they support. There is a tremendous need for a unified set of ethics that DSPs can utilize on an ongoing basis in order to ethically perform their tasks as human service professionals. In the absence of a set of ethics and standards, professionals would need to determine most of their decisions on their own values, morals, and ideas about life. This is a dangerous notion, and one that cannot be underestimated or taken lightly. The code of ethics presented in this series of articles will help DSPs to be able to act and perform each day with great skill and ethical practice. Making the ethics come to life is our primary task as direct support professionals. Join us next month for a deeper exploration into the nine parts of the code of ethics. You will be glad you did.

About the author

John Raffaele is the Director of Educational Services at the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals. His career spans over three decades, and those years have been spent teaching direct support professionals and the people they support, including those with IDD, at-risk youth, and people with chronic and terminal illnesses. John has also worked as a Director of Training and Education for a developmental disabilities service provider and taught at The State University at New Paltz, NY and for the City University of New York City. He founded his own international direct support professional consulting company in 2012 and has developed many exciting and informative training programs and helped propel the NADSP into national prominence. John became NADSP's Director of Educational Services in December of 2016. John has educated tens of thousands of people in the NADSP Code of Ethics and Competencies and most recently, the NADSP Informed Decision Making curriculum and Frontline Supervisor Train the Trainer curriculum.

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