

# NORDIC ETHICAL CODE FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

## PREFACE

The principles of professional ethics follow general ethical principles. The shared values include justice, equality and respect for the autonomy and dignity of individuals and their communities. Psychologists respect the principles of human rights as defined by international treaties and human rights conventions. However, since the nature of psychologists' work is such that they have to address special situations that may demand difficult decision-making and ethical reflections, the general principles of ethics are insufficient as the sole guidelines for practice. Therefore, psychologists have formulated the Ethical Code to guide and support ethical reflection.

Ethical reflection should pervade all professional activity. Ethical implications should be considered as part of the work context together with legal, professional and other frameworks.

The European Federation of Professional Psychologists' Associations (EFPPA) approved a Meta-Code of Ethics in 1995. This Meta-Code is intended to apply to all situations that professional psychologists encounter in their work.

The Nordic psychologists' associations have shared common principles of professional ethics since the 1980s. The principles were modified in accordance with EFPPA's Meta-Code of Ethics in 1997 and in accordance with EFPA's Model Code of Ethics in 2020. Nevertheless, this document stands in its own right with no further compliance to the EFPA Code of Ethics. The specifications have also been based on the growing need to modify the ethical principles to advance ethical awareness and reflection.

The ethical principles have been organised around four main principles:

- Respect for the individual's rights and dignity
- Professional competence
- Responsibility
- Professional integrity

The principles have been designed to:

- Support Nordic psychologists in situations in which they need to take a stand on ethical issues
- Protect clients against inappropriate and/or harmful measures
- Support cooperation among psychologists and between psychologists and other professionals
- Retain the public's trust in professional psychologists' practice
- Serve as a basis for creating guidelines and instructions for areas of specialisation in psychology

These ethical principles have been designed to be solely used by psychologists. Thus, they cannot be directly interpreted using the professional language and concepts of other professions, for example from the viewpoint of law.

The principles of professional ethics regulate psychologists' professional practice. This professional practice includes all situations in which psychologists have a professional relationship with an individual, a group, or an organisation.

The principles of professional ethics are also to be followed in professional practice that is not directly psychological in nature, but which is nevertheless practised by psychologists and based on the skills achieved during education and training.

The Nordic psychological associations are responsible for motivating and advancing ethical reflection and debate among their members by, for example, organising training and consultation. In addition, the associations expect their members to develop their awareness of ethical issues in professional practice.

As members of the Nordic psychological associations we are obliged to reflect on our practice and act in accordance with the ethical principles. The associations are responsible for investigating any complaints regarding their members and for taking a position with respect to such complaints and possible sanctions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Psychologists' practice is based on science and substantiated professional experience. Psychology and the psychological profession are in constant development, producing new and more complex knowledge and methods. Since social change continuously gives rise to new problematic situations, it is important that psychologists consider their own limitations and are able to turn to their colleagues and other professionals for additional knowledge and competence.

Psychologists use their professional knowledge in many different roles, professional situations, and when using work methods. Psychologists have the necessary resources to bring about significant changes in the conditions of individuals, groups and organisations. Psychologists have the power to profoundly affect people's lives.

This places high demands on psychologists' ethical awareness, and has been one of the primary reasons for designing codes of professional ethics.

Many of the professional relationships and work assignments of psychologists are such that they cannot be formally regulated. In such cases, the ethical awareness, responsibility and professional competence of the individual psychologist plays a crucial role.

The discussion on and the development of principles of professional ethics is an ongoing process.

## 2. PRINCIPLES OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

### Defining the client

In the following, all the individuals, groups and organisations with whom psychologists interact on a professional basis are referred to as clients. In certain situations, the term client may also refer to secondary parties, for example the family of a primary client, the organisational environment of a client group, or the clients, patients or other parties concerned in a client organisation.

### The individual's rights and dignity

The psychologist shows respect for and works to promote the development of the fundamental rights, dignity and value of every human being. The psychologist respects the individual's right to privacy, confidentiality, self-determination and autonomy in accordance with their other professional responsibilities, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and prevailing law.

## 2.1 RESPECT

The psychologist respects fundamental rights, dignity and integrity, and works in such a way that their psychological expertise will not be used to harm, abuse or oppress. The psychologist respects the knowledge, views, experience and expertise of clients and other parties concerned. The psychologist respects the special expertise, obligations and responsibility of colleagues and other professionals.

The psychologist takes the client's individual, role-related, cultural and social differences into consideration. The psychologist also considers how individual, role-related, cultural and social differences can affect professional practice.

### Confidentiality and professional secrecy

The psychologist protects the privacy of confidential information received about clients and other parties. This principle can be waived if the client or other parties are clearly in danger. The psychologist may also be obliged by law to hand over information. In such cases, the psychologist informs the client of the limits of confidentiality as defined by law.

### Informed consent and freedom of choice

The psychologist informs the client of planned measures and discusses actions and their probable consequences with the client. In addition, the psychologist considers whether the manner in which the information is delivered is respectful and appropriate given the client's ability to receive and process information. The psychologist thus makes informed consent possible by giving the client the necessary information to decide whether to approve the measures.

### Self-determination

The psychologist defends the client's autonomy and right of self-determination. This also applies to the client's right to begin or end the professional relationship. When working with children or clients who have been committed to treatment against their will, or in acute situations, respecting the client's autonomy and developing a cooperative relationship must always be the goal.

## 2.2. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

The psychologist seeks to develop individual professional competence and to maintain a high standard. The psychologist strives for an awareness of their professional and personal strengths and weaknesses in order to be able to realistically evaluate individual competence when taking on work assignments. The psychologist takes their own personal circumstances into consideration and how these might affect their personal competence. The psychologist only takes on such assignments, provides such services and uses such methods in which they are competent based on their individual training and experience.

### Ethical awareness

One of the preconditions of high professional competence is that the psychologist is aware of the principles of professional ethics and applies them in their professional practice.

### Developing competence

The psychologist's work is based on science and substantiated professional experience. The psychologist continuously strives to develop their individual professional competence by keeping up with developments in psychology as a science and as a profession.

### Limitations of competence

The psychologist works within the limits of their individual training, experience and personal abilities, and seeks professional help and support in difficult situations.

### Methodological limitations

The psychologist is aware of the limitations of psychological methods and the conclusions drawn from them. The psychologist exercises special caution when using methods, devices and techniques, which do not meet the standard requirements of methods, or which the psychologist does not thoroughly master.

### External limitations

The psychologist considers how circumstances and conditions may enhance or hinder their ability to use their individual competence and methods appropriately.

## 2.3. RESPONSIBILITY

The psychologist considers their professional and scientific responsibilities to both clients and the organisation and society in which the psychologist lives and works. The psychologist avoids causing harm to anyone and is responsible for their individual actions. The psychologist always aims to ensure that their services will not be misused.

Differences in knowledge and power always affect the psychologist's professional relationships with colleagues and clients. The greater these differences, the greater the psychologist's responsibility.

### Responsibility

The psychologist is personally responsible for the quality and consequences of their professional practice, and is also aware of being perceived by others as a representative of the entire profession. The psychologist is aware of how they use psychological knowledge also outside professional practice.

### Avoiding misuse/harm

The psychologist avoids misusing psychological knowledge or applications, and ensures that any harm, which cannot be avoided, will be as limited as possible.

The psychologist does not participate in actions which, by using or threatening to use physical or psychological force (indoctrination, brain-washing, torture, etc.), aim to:

- Extort information or a confession from someone
- Persuade someone to reveal, deny or change their personal or another person's world view or political, religious or ethical convictions

The psychologist aims to actively prevent the use of psychological knowledge for such purposes and will make knowledge of such practices available to the national psychological association or relevant human rights bodies.

### Handling ethical dilemmas

The psychologist is aware of the existence of ethical dilemmas in professional practice. The psychologist is responsible for resolving such problems and discussing them with colleagues, commissioners and/or the relevant psychological association. The psychologist should also inform any other parties concerned of the requirements set by the principles of professional ethics.

### Continuing responsibility

The psychologist is responsible for making an agreement with the client on the conditions, course, conclusion and follow-up of the professional contact. The psychologist is aware of their responsibility to the client after the formal conclusion of the professional relationship. Following the conclusion of a professional relationship with a client, the psychologist still has to take these ethical standards into account.

### Extended responsibility

The psychologist has an extended responsibility for scientific and professional practice and for applying professional ethics standards in relation to the psychologist's assistants and people under their supervision or training. When teaching psychological work methods the psychologist is also responsible for discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the methods, as well as their possible ethical implications.

## 2.4. PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

The psychologist strives for professional integrity in research, teaching and psychological practice. This means that the psychologist is honest and impartial and treats the other parties concerned with respect. The psychologist makes their role as clear as possible in all working contexts.

### Openness and clarity

The psychologist provides adequate information about their individual abilities, work experience, competence and commitment to the profession and only uses professional titles they are entitled to use based on training, licence and employment.

The psychologist aims for objectivity and precision when giving statements as a psychologist. The psychologist provides information on psychology and psychologists' professional practice in such a way as to avoid misconceptions or harm to psychology as a science or as a profession.

The psychologist informs the client in advance of the financial conditions of the professional relationship and is aware of the consequences that could result from the psychologist accepting, in addition to the official fee, gifts or other special favours from the client.

### Conflicts of interests and exploitation

The psychologist strives for an awareness of their own personal needs, attitudes and values and their role in the professional relationship. The psychologist must not misuse their power and status by abusing the client's dependence and trust.

The psychologist avoids developing an extraprofessional relationship with the client. Such relationships reduce the required professional distance and may lead to conflicts of interest or to abuse. The psychologist is aware of the direct and indirect ways in which intimacy or sexuality can affect the relationship between the psychologist and the client. The psychologist avoids letting the relationship become private or sexual in nature. There must be no sexual relations between the psychologist and the client.

## 3. FOLLOWING THE PRINCIPLES OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

### 3.1. ETHICAL COUNSELING FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

The principles of professional ethics have been designated to support psychologists in their daily practice, in reflection and planning, and in resolving ethical dilemmas in their professional practice.

It is important to pay attention to the following:

The psychologist's responsibility is linked to the nature of the professional relationship and of the work assignment in question.

The content of the ethical principles should be developed by means of active and continuous discussion.

### Ethical reflection

When accepting or rejecting a work assignment the psychologist reflects on the related ethical dimensions. This gives rise to, clarifies and increases awareness of professional ethics. The constant ethical reflection in professional practice helps the psychologist to recognise ethical dilemmas.

### Ethical dilemmas

The four main principles of professional ethics are always interdependent and can, in certain situations, be in conflict. Such ethical dilemmas demand careful reflection and often also discussion with clients and colleagues, to assess the interrelations of the ethical principles. Regardless of such discrepancies, it may be necessary to make decisions in such conflict situations, and act according to them. In practice, this may mean giving priority to certain principles over others.

### Ethical supervision

When faced with complex issues of professional ethics, the psychologist consults a colleague and/or the board of professional ethics. Such consultation is in itself an expression of ethical awareness, but the decision will still rest with the individual psychologist. When a psychologist notices that a colleague is facing a situation in which the principles of professional ethics are in conflict, they offer support to resolve the dilemma.

## 3.2. PROVIDING INFORMATION TO THE PUBLIC

Informational material that is intended for the public should include information on psychologists' principles of professional ethics and other current guidelines.

Psychologists provide commissioners and/or the parties concerned with sufficient information about the guidelines and principles of professional ethics, in case of proceedings concerning complaints, and possible sanctions.

## 3.3. HANDLING COMPLAINTS ABOUT PSYCHOLOGISTS

The principles of professional ethics are also meant to serve as support when assessing complaints concerning the actions of psychologists. In such assessments, attention is paid to the ethical dilemmas that may have arisen and to the prioritisation decisions the psychologist has made when considering the situation from the viewpoint of professional ethics.

When a psychologist notices that a colleague is violating the principles of professional ethics, they must discuss the matter with the colleague in question before notifying the Ethics Board.