



# **From Then to Now: Social Work's Enduring Legacy in Times of Upheaval**

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# **Part 1: Grounding in History, Ethics, & Professional Identity**

# Learning Objectives

This 2 hour intensive will explore how social workers can stay grounded in professional values while navigating career transitions and systemic crises.

**Part 1:** We will reflect on the profession's history through major crisis periods and engage with NASW's Code of Ethics in today's complex climate and consider our place in this lineage.

# Why This? Why Now?

We are living in turbulent times. We want to consider how social workers have dealt with challenges before and learn from our history. We also want to consider how our ethics and principles remain constant and can ground us during uncertainty.

# Professional Reflection

In recent years, social workers and other helping professionals have been navigating overlapping crises - public health challenges, social and political uncertainty, and increasing demands across systems of care. Throughout the profession's history, periods of crisis have often reshaped practice conditions, ethical tensions, and the role of social work itself.

For many, these pressures are compounded by rising workloads, resource constraints, and emotional fatigue. At times, the experience can feel overwhelming, discouraging, or demoralizing, raising questions about sustainability and impact. On other days, something shifts – a patient interaction, a small success, or a moment of connection – and there is a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to the work.

# In Practice

How many of you have felt helpless and Hopeless, powerless or demoralized in recent times?

Have any of you felt galvanized or a renewed sense of purpose in these times?



# NASW Ethical Principles

- Service
- Social justice
- Dignity and worth of the person
- Importance of human relationships
- Integrity
- Competence

# Ethical Tensions

An ethical tension is a decision-making situation where a person must choose between competing moral imperatives, often resulting in no fully satisfactory outcome.

# Professional Reflection: What Do You Notice?

- What ethical tensions am I noticing in my current professional role?
- Where am I experiencing competing values, responsibilities, or expectations?
- In what situations do I feel pulled in different directions professionally?
- What aspects of my work feel ethically unclear or difficult to navigate?
- Where am I experiencing discomfort in my professional role, and what might it be pointing to?



**We've Been Here**  
**Before**

# Civil Rights Movement

“Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year. Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part.”

*John Lewis, Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*

# “Not Alone With Cancer”: A Guide for Those who Care, what to Expect, what to Do

1974

- **Context:** cancer treatments were limited; advanced cancers were common
- **Ethical tensions:** “suffering”, hopelessness, helplessness
- **Social Work response:** go toward the patient, offer support and care
- **Core ethical principles:** service, dignity, importance of human relationships

# HIV/AIDS Crisis

## *1980s–1990s*

- **Context:** patients with cancer and HIV faced stigma and limited access to needed services
- **Ethical tensions:** equity, discrimination, limited resource allocation
- **SW response:** advocacy, multidisciplinary coordination, counseling
- **Core ethical principles:** Service & Social Justice

# AOSW is formed...

1984

- **Context:** growth of the field of oncology social work
- **Ethical tensions:** need for specialization, professional affiliation
- **SW response:** founding of AOSW, dedicated to the psychosocial care of people affected by cancer
- **Core ethical principles:** Competence

# Hospice and Palliative Care

**1983 (Hospice); 1990's (Palliative Care)**

- **Context:** shift from purely curative focus to quality of life and end-of-life care
- **Ethical tensions:** balancing hope and realistic expectations
- **SW response:** advanced care planning, family support, symptom management
- **Core ethical principles:** dignity/worth of the person & social justice

# Big Business of Healthcare: Profits Over Values

- **Context:** treatment advances & people living longer with cancer, rising financial toxicity of cancer treatment treatment advances, big business *in* healthcare, and healthcare *as* a business
- **Ethical tensions:** shifting from values-based to profits over people
- **SW response:** social advocacy, patient empowerment
- **Core ethical principles:** social justice, integrity

# The Evolving Healthcare Landscape

([Lancet report](#))

2025

- **Context:** growing crisis in the human experience of cancer care despite overall survival rates and unprecedented treatments for cancer
- **Ethical tensions:** desire to provide humane, compassionate care despite the disconnect in the system
- **SW response:** social workers as part of the solution
- **Core ethical principles:** dignity and worth of the person

# Ongoing Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

## 2020 - 2026


- **Context:** challenged to manage personal fear and isolation while helping health systems manage crises, staffing shortages
- **Ethical tensions:** dwindling resources for patients, burnout and moral distress among providers
- **SW response:** leadership in crisis response & care coordination, advocacy for equitable access to resources, support for patients/clients/families and frontline systems under strain
- **Core ethical principles:** service, social justice, dignity & worth of the person, importance of human relationships

# Ethics as a (consistent) Anchor


- Roles of social workers shift
- Systems, politics, and context change
- Core ethical principles remain consistent
- Ethics provide a steady framework in uncertainty



**Break**



**Part 2: Pathways  
Forward - Reimagining  
Careers While Staying  
Anchored**



# Learning Objectives

This 2 hour intensive will explore how social workers can stay grounded in professional values while navigating career transitions and systemic crises.

**Part 2:** Will focus on reimagining professional roles using a value-based framework, consider career pathways, theories of change, and ethical decision making under pressure.

# Opening Poll

How many of you have considered changing careers in the last:

- 2 years?
- 2 hours?
- 2 minutes?

# Impact of Crisis

A crisis is defined as “an unstable, dangerous, or decisive turning point in events such as a natural disaster, a personal emergency, a cancer diagnosis- that requires immediate action to prevent worsening outcomes.”

It signifies a moment when normal coping mechanisms fail, causing significant disruption, fear, or dysfunction

# Types of Crises

- **Situational Crises:** Sudden, unexpected, and often uncontrollable events (divorce, illness, unexpected job loss, sudden poverty)
- **Maturation/Developmental Crisis:** Related to life-transitions, milestones, or growing up, starting a family, retiring, or children leaving home

# Types of Crises (continued)

- **Adventitious/Social Crises:** Rare, unexpected, and often external events that impact a person or community. Natural disasters (floods, wildfires, earthquakes) or man-made disasters (war, riots, violent crime)
- **Existential Crises:** Internal conflicts focused on life purpose, meaning, or spirituality

# The Current Environment

One could suggest that the times we are living in are a combination of situational and social crises, which in turn can lead to existential crises for many of us.

# Crisis (continued)

- What constitutes a “crisis” is influenced by one’s perception of the event, coping responses, and available resources
- It is often characterized as a time of upheaval and a turning point.
- People are also often more open to learning new skills during a crisis

# Focus: Ethics & Internal Alignment

- How to make decisions when values conflict with external reality
- How to regulate emotional and ethical responses
- Ethics as guide through internal and external crises

# Stages of Change: Impact of Crisis on Career Re-evaluation

- A framework for understanding how people navigate change over time
- Crisis often intensifies reflection, uncertainty and career re-evaluation
- Change is a process, not a single decision or moment
- Movement through change is non-linear and can involve revisiting earlier stages
- Focuses on readiness, ambivalence, and values-based decision-making

# Pre-Contemplation

**Perspective:** “I’m fine.”

**Common Patterns:** Minimization, Externalization.

**Questions at this stage of change:**

- What about my current job/life situation leads me to believe “things are fine” right now?
- Who or what is nudging me to think about change, and why might I be dismissing that feedback?
- What circumstances would have to occur for me to even *consider* a different career path?

# Pre-Contemplation (cont'd)

## Internal questions at this stage of change:

- What am I not yet willing to acknowledge?
- What feels protected by staying the same?
- What am I minimizing (or avoiding)?
- What might I have to give up in order to change?

# Contemplation

**Perspective:** “I’m not sure this is working anymore.”

**Common Patterns:** Acknowledging dissatisfaction, Ambivalence, Weighing risks

**Questions at this stage of change:**

- What are the specific benefits I expect from a career change, and how important are they to me?
- What are the main costs or losses I fear if I change (income, status, routine), and how realistic are those fears?
- If I remained where I am for five more years, how would I feel about that outcome?

# Contemplation (cont'd)

## Internal questions at this stage of change:

- What am I most ambivalent about?
- What do I gain by staying, and what do I lose by changing?
- What values feel in conflict right now?
- Which of my options best aligns with my values?

# Contemplation - One More Thing...

People get STUCK here!!



You Always Have Other Options !

# Preparation

**Perspective:** Exploring options, Networking, Gathering information

**Common Patterns:** Planning, goal-setting, skill-building, initial behavioral steps (e.g. updating resume)

**Questions at this stage of change:**

- What specific kind of change am I considering?
- What information would help me make an informed decision?
- What skills, credentials, or contacts will I need, and how can I obtain them?
- Who can support me and what specific help will I ask for?

# Preparation (cont'd)

## Internal questions to at this stage of change:

- Where or how can I practice competence without self-abandonment?
- What roles still allow me serve, advocate or advance social justice?
- What choice feels most sustainable for me?

# Action

**Perspective:** Role shift, Boundary setting, Career transition

**Common Patterns:** Taking concrete steps, implementing plans

**Questions at this stage of change:**

- Which actions am I committed to taking this month, and how will I measure progress?
- What is the smallest next step I can take?
- What barriers might arise, and what specific coping strategies will I use?

# Action (cont'd)

## Internal questions at this stage of change:

- What will help me stay consistent with the actions I've committed to?
- What might interfere with my follow-through in real time?
- What supports will help me sustain this transition and keep moving forward?

# About Action...

- After exploring options one may determine that the grass is not greener on the other side.
  - Even a decision *not* to take an action...*is* an action!
  - The “right” opportunity may not have arrived “yet”.
- Readiness can include both action and intentional waiting.

# Maintenance

**Perspective:** Integration, Recommitment, Ongoing alignment with values

**Common Patterns:** Ongoing reflection and adjustment, strengthening routines, sustaining (behavioral) change

## **Questions at this stage of change:**

- Which sources of ongoing growth and community will I maintain to protect this new path?
- How will I celebrate or reinforce small milestones to sustain momentum?
- Who or what helps me stay aligned once I continue forward?

# Maintenance (cont'd)

## Internal questions at this stage of change:

- What does continued alignment with my values look like in practice now?
- What helps me stay grounded in this change on difficult days?
- What habits or supports are essential for sustaining this change/new direction?

# Relapse / Recycling

**Perspective:** Disruption of change, Learning opportunity

**Common Patterns:** Self-criticism, Doubt, Re-encountering unresolved barriers, re-engagement with earlier stages

**Questions at this stage of change:**

- What external stressors or conditions contributed to this shift?
- What supports were missing or unavailable?
- Who or what systems influence my ability to stay on track?
- What resources or structures need to be adjusted moving forward?

# Relapse / Recycling cont'd

## Internal questions at this stage of change:

- What did this experience teach me about what I still need?
- What is this experience showing me about readiness and capacity for change?
- What contributed to my return to an earlier stage of change?
- What supports or conditions are still needed for sustained change?

# Small Group Discussion

## Discussion Questions:

- Where are you in the stages of change?
- Which ethical values feel most challenged right now?
- What would it look like to let your ethics guide your next step?

## Report out:

- Key insights or themes

# Closing Reflections

- Crisis is recurring; ethical tension is expected
- Career questioning is a normal response, not a failure
- In moments of crisis, career questions are often related to meaning, ethics, and alignment
- The task is not simply to change or stay the same, but to respond with intention
- Ethics serve as guideposts for decision-making in uncertainty

# Bringing It All Together

Write down:

- One ethical value that consistently grounds my professional practice is \_\_\_\_\_.
- One small next step in my professional practice or career path is \_\_\_\_\_.

# John Lewis's Wisdom

" You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone-any person or any force-dampen, dim or diminish your light....Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won."

Lewis on being human in *Across that Bridge: a Vision for Change and the Future of America*

# Amanda Gorman's Wisdom

“ While we might feel small, separate, and all alone, Our people have never been more closely tethered.

The question isn't IF we can weather this unknown, but HOW we will weather this unknown together. “

(Gorman, 2021)

# Amanda Gorman

“ for all of us both hurting and healing, who choose to carry on.”

# Thanks!

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