

Post-Baccalaureate Health Professions

Ethical Decision-Making
for Interviews and Situational Judgment Tests



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Topics

1. Two categories of ethical questions
2. Why ethical dilemmas in admissions?
3. Where you'll encounter scenarios involving ethical dilemmas
4. The four principles of clinical ethics
5. Examples
6. Framework for thinking through ethical dilemmas
7. Practice question



Two categories of ethical questions

Category 1: Broad Ethical or Policy Questions

Examples:

“What is and isn’t working well in the U.S. healthcare system?”

“What are some key social determinants of health?”

What They’re Assessing

- Awareness of some of the large issues impacting the profession
- Ability to discuss complex issues respectfully and with balanced reasoning
- Awareness of competing values and trade-offs

How to prepare:

Review articles we’ve posted on the Preparing for Interviews page of our website for an introduction to some of the big ethical, social, and policy dimensions of healthcare practice.

Two categories of ethical questions

Category 2: Ethical Dilemma Scenarios

This topic is the focus of this presentation.



Why ethical dilemmas in admissions?

They are seeking to assess:

1. Ethical Judgment and Professional Integrity

- A strong moral compass
- Personal accountability, integrity, and professionalism
- Ability to engage in sound ethical reasoning in ambiguous situations



Why ethical dilemmas in admissions?

They are seeking to assess:

2. Your ability to engage in critical thinking and creative problem-solving, utilizing the following skills:

- Respectfully consider multiple perspectives in a complex, nuanced situation
- Identify additional information you'd want to gather to inform your decision
- Generate thoughtful, creative ideas and solutions
- Reflect upon and learn from your past experiences
- Thoughtfully justify decisions

Why ethical dilemmas in admissions?

They are seeking to assess:

3. Social and Interpersonal Intelligence

- Empathy for and curiosity about others' motivations
- Respect for differing viewpoints
- Sensitivity to diverse backgrounds and lived experiences
- A natural inclination toward collaborative problem-solving
- A thoughtful, constructive approach to conflict



Why ethical dilemmas in admissions?

And they are screening for red flags, such as:

- Inflexibility
- Lack of empathy
- Lack of attention to nuance
- Overconfidence



Where you'll encounter scenarios involving ethical dilemmas

Casper:

- Spoken (video) responses:
1 minute to respond. Each prompt has 2 questions, presented one at a time.
- Typed responses:
3.5 minutes to respond. Each prompt has 2 questions, presented together.

Traditional interview questions:

- 1-3 minute answers

MMIs:

- 6-8 minute answers

The Four Principles of Clinical Ethics



AUTONOMY

Respect for Patient Decision-Making

- Patients have the right to make informed decisions about their own healthcare.
- Informed consent is essential, requiring full disclosure of risks, benefits, and alternatives.
- Ethical challenges arise when patients refuse life-saving treatments or when surrogate decision-makers are involved, but the patients choice should always be respected



JUSTICE

Fair and Equitable Treatment

- Healthcare resources should be distributed fairly, ensuring equal access to care.
- Ethical concerns arise when prioritizing treatments, allocating scarce resources, or addressing disparities in healthcare.
- Justice also includes addressing systemic issues, such as racial and socioeconomic inequalities in medicine.



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BENEFICENCE

Acting in the Patient's Best Interest

- Physicians must prioritize the well-being of their patients and provide the most beneficial treatment options.
- Balancing medical benefits with patient preferences can be complex, especially when treatments have significant risks.
- Ethical dilemmas occur when a treatment is beneficial but conflicts with a patient's values or beliefs, but the doctor needs to use their own judgement to decide the suitable course of action



NON-MALEFICENCE

"Do No Harm"

- Healthcare providers must avoid causing unnecessary harm or suffering.
- This principle requires careful risk-benefit analysis to prevent unintended consequences.
- Ethical concerns include end-of-life care, experimental treatments, and withholding potentially harmful interventions. In extreme cases, a doctor may choose to not proceed with further treatment for palliative (end of life) patients to avoid prolonging pain or suffering.

Patient Autonomy > Non-Maleficence > Beneficence > Distributive Justice

Example

Cheryl Strayed and Steve Almond: Dear Sugars podcast, “Pet Dilemmas” episode
<https://www.wbur.org/dearsugar/2026/01/17/pet-dilemmas-julia-barton> (start at 22:13)

A couple, X and Y, lived together in X’s home for five years. During that time, they adopted two cats together. About a year ago, the couple broke up and Y moved out. Deciding what to do about the cats was difficult, but they ultimately agreed that it would be best for the cats to remain with X.

Multiple times since then, X has assured Y that it would be okay to continue to visit the cats every other week, which Y has been doing consistently.

Over the past year, however, X has come to realize that this arrangement is not sustainable. The cats are likely to live many more years, and Y’s interactions with X have become increasingly distressing. X wants to be able to move forward in life without maintaining ongoing contact with Y.

Complicating the situation further, Y has a history of mental illness that has been exacerbated by stress. Several years ago, Y experienced a significant mental health crisis following the sudden death of a kitten. X is reasonably concerned that, if they were to cut Y off from visiting the cats, Y could spiral into another mental health crisis.

- How should X proceed?



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Here’s how they responded:

- Empathized with the people’s situation
- Named the decision they were being asked to weigh in on
- Considered the situation from both points-of-view
- Identified: What are their gaps in knowledge? What additional considerations would influence their answer?
- Brainstormed: What are some possible creative solutions?
 - For each suggestion, they raised pros, cons, and likely outcomes

Example

Shankar Vedantam's Hidden Brain podcast, "You 2.0: Trusting Your Doubt" episode

Interviewee: Dr. Bobby Parmar

<https://www.hiddenbrain.org/podcast/you-2-0-trusting-your-doubt/> (start at 40:41)

Context:

Identifying the differences in the ways that more- and less-experienced military officers make decisions when dealing with complex, ambiguous situations.

Characteristics of the decision-making process taken by the more experienced officers:

- Start by noting intuition/gut reaction, but treat it as an initial hypothesis rather than a final decision
- Identify gaps in knowledge and the questions to ask
- Build strategies that are flexible, depending on how things proceed
 - Consider possible complications, then plan for ways to mitigate them
 - Have a Plan B

Framework for Thinking Through Ethical Dilemmas

1. Empathize with the people in the situation

2. Name the decision you're being asked to make

For instance:

You notice a senior clinician making dismissive comments to a patient that seem unprofessional.

- *“I’m being asked to decide whether to respond to potentially concerning behavior by a person who is in a position of authority and, if so, how I would proceed.”*

One of your patients requests a treatment approach that conflicts with standard medical practice.

- *“I’m being asked to determine how to respect the patient’s autonomy while still upholding safe and ethical medical care.”*



Framework for Thinking Through Ethical Dilemmas

3. Consider the situation from multiple points-of-view:

- Who stands to be affected, and how?
- Where do their interests overlap and where are they in tension?
- For clinical scenarios, refer to the principles of biomedical ethics:
 - autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, distributive justice

4. Check in with your gut reaction, but then identify missing information:

- What unstated factors might be shaping people's behavior?
- Where are the gaps in your knowledge?
 - What additional information would help you make an informed decision and/or influence your answer?

Tip: Pay attention to assumptions you are tempted to make. They can lead to a question worth asking.



Framework for Thinking Through Ethical Dilemmas

- **Describe how you would gather more information:**

What concrete steps would you take?

- Typically includes talking compassionately and respectfully with one or more people involved
- Consult relevant policies, supervisors, or professional guidelines

- **Identify and discuss some options**

- If there's not an obvious "right" answer, identify at least two options to consider
- Briefly weigh the pros, cons, and likely outcomes of each
- Plan for contingencies (great to do this if time allows):
 - Conditional reasoning: "If X is true, I would choose option A; if Y is true, I would choose option B."
 - Stepwise approach: "First, I would try A. If that doesn't work, my next step would be B."

- **Finally, state your preferred course of action and summarize why you chose that one.**



Practice Question

You are in professional school.

While taking an important test, you see a classmate behaving in a manner that looks like they are cheating on the test.

How would you handle the situation?

- Empathize with the people in the situation
- Name the decision you're being asked to make
- Consider the situation from multiple points-of-view
- Check in with your gut reaction, but then identify missing information
- Describe how you would gather more information
- Identify and discuss some options: pros/cons/likely outcomes/contingencies
- Finally, state your preferred course of action and summarize why you chose that one

A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making



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A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making

RECOGNIZE AN ETHICAL ISSUE

1. Could this decision or situation be damaging to someone or to some group? Does this decision involve a choice between a good and bad alternative, or perhaps between two “goods” or between two “bads”?
2. Is this issue about more than what is legal or what is most efficient? If so, how?



A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making

GET THE FACTS

3. What are the relevant facts of the case? What facts are not known? Can I learn more about the situation? Do I know enough to make a decision?
4. What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? Are some concerns more important? Why?
5. What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant persons and groups been consulted? Have I identified creative options?



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A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making

EVALUATE ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS

6. Evaluate the options by asking the following questions:

- Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm?
- Which option best respects the rights of all who have a stake?
- Which option treats people equally or proportionately?
- Which option best serves the community as a whole, not just some members?
- Which option leads me to act as the sort of person I want to be?



A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making

MAKE A DECISION AND TEST IT

7. Considering all these approaches, which option best addresses the situation?
8. If I told someone I respect-or told a television audience-which option I have chosen, what would they say?





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