



Code of Ethics

for the Physical Therapy Profession



Preamble

The vision of the American Physical Therapy Association is “transforming society by optimizing movement to improve the human experience.” Our profession’s charge, as we strive to be an inclusive moral community that is diverse and equitable, is to meet the health needs of all people. APTA is a voluntary professional society that strives both to serve APTA members and to support the profession as a whole. Ethical conduct by physical therapists and physical therapist assistants is vital to the standing of the profession.

The Code of Ethics for the Physical Therapy Profession established by APTA is the ethical foundation to which APTA members commit and was developed to provide guidance and define the ethical expectations for the profession. The Code of Ethics establishes the ethical framework guiding the conduct of all members of the physical therapy profession (physical therapists and physical therapist assistants) throughout their careers, in all practice settings, and in all roles relating to patient and client management, consultation, education, research, and administration. The Code of Ethics also provides the public with ethical standards to which we aspire and for which we are accountable. Fundamental to the Code of Ethics is the obligation of the physical therapy professional to educate, enable, and empower the public to facilitate greater independence, health, wellness, and enhanced quality of life.

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants strive for the highest standards of ethical conduct based on the core values of the profession and the ethical principles (respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, veracity, and fidelity) that are part of ethical action at all levels: individual, organizational, and societal. The Ethical Commitments set forth in the Code of Ethics are important to patients, clients, the public, colleagues, and other health care providers. The Ethical Commitments detail the elements of the ethical fiduciary duty of physical therapists and physical therapist assistants to act in the best interests of their patients and clients. Regulators and others may rely on the Code of Ethics in assessing the conduct of physical therapists and physical therapist assistants.

The Standards of Conduct set forth in the Code of Ethics are used by the APTA Ethics and Judicial Committee to assess whether APTA members have engaged in unethical conduct. At all times the physical therapist maintains responsibility for all physical therapist services. The physical therapist assistant shall work in collaboration with and under the supervision of the physical therapist for select interventions when appropriate. Student physical therapists and student physical therapist assistants have the responsibility to adhere to the Code of Ethics during their entire academic program under the guidance of faculty and supervising clinical instructors.

APTA Code of Ethics Overview

The nine Ethical Commitments are: **Respect, Integrity, Accountability, Maintaining Professional Relationships, Compassion and Trust, Responsible Business and Organizational Practices, Direction and Supervision, Professional Expertise, and Societal Responsibility.**

The Code serves two purposes:

1. It delineates enforceable Standards of Conduct in accordance with those Ethical Commitments that APTA enforces with regard to APTA members. The Standards of Conduct address the actions of physical therapists and physical therapist assistants in their roles relating to patient and client management, consultation, education, research, and administration.
2. It provides aspirational illustrative examples of Ethical Commitments that guide physical therapists and physical therapist assistants toward ethical courses of action in professional and volunteer roles related to their field.

This Code of Ethics is not exhaustive; that is, the Ethical Commitments and Standards of Conduct cannot address every possible situation. In some circumstances, APTA may set higher expectations than legal requirements applicable to physical therapist and physical therapist assistant members that are enforced by state licensing authorities. In other circumstances, the enforceable Standards of Conduct may not address behavior that, although unethical, does not relate to the core professional roles of physical therapist and physical therapist assistant members.

All physical therapist and physical therapist assistant members shall act in an ethically responsible manner, using the Ethical Commitments set forth in the Code of Ethics to guide their decisions and actions. The Code of Ethics does not instruct the individual professional on what decision to make or how to act; rather, it provides guidance for ethical decision-making. Ethical decision-making is a process by which the Ethical Commitments and Standards of Conduct need to be taken into consideration as the professional makes an ethical judgment.

In addition to seeking guidance from the Code of Ethics, PTs, PTAs, and students should also seek advice from trusted mentors or colleagues when ethical issues arise, using the Code as a guide for deliberation and action.

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Ethical Principles

The nine Ethical Commitments for the physical therapy profession build on the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, veracity, and fidelity, which are the pillars of ethical decision-making. PTs and PTAs should carefully consider, balance, and weigh these commitments within the context of the situation in making ethical judgments that are in the best interest of the patient or client and society. Members of the physical therapy profession shall abide by the ethical principles of:

Autonomy

Respect the rights of individuals to make decisions and determinations about their life and body to the greatest extent possible. Respecting autonomy includes the imperative to always respect another's privacy, maintain confidentiality, and obtain informed and ongoing consent in every interaction involving physical touching of another individual.

Beneficence

Take action to ensure the welfare and safety of the individuals with whom they make professional decisions, to advance the good of the individual and society.

Nonmaleficence

Make decisions and take actions with the intention to prevent or minimize injury, harm, or wrongdoing.

Justice

Make objective decisions that result in the most equitable outcome possible, as justice is an expression of the mutual recognition of respect for each other's human dignity and an acknowledgement that we live together in an interdependent community.

Veracity

Be honest and truthful in all professional decisions and actions, with all internal and external parties.

Fidelity

Treat all individuals (people, groups, and populations) with respect, fairness, discretion, and integrity.

Ethical Commitments and Standards of Conduct

As applied to the physical therapy profession, APTA builds on these principles to identify **nine Ethical Commitments to which all APTA members should aspire and which serve as a basis for APTA's enforceable Standards of Conduct.**

Respect

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall respect the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals.

Integrity

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall act with professional integrity and responsibility and fulfill their respective legal and ethical obligations.

Accountability

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall be accountable for making sound professional judgments and decisions within the scope of practice established by laws and regulations.

Maintaining Professional Relationships

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall respect the boundaries of professional, therapeutic, organizational, and personal relationships to promote a safe environment.

Compassion and Trust

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall be trustworthy and compassionate in addressing the rights and needs of patients and clients.

Responsible Business and Organizational Practices

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall promote accountable and truthful organizational behaviors and business practices.

Direction and Supervision

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall provide appropriate and timely direction to and communication with anyone over whom they have legal supervisory responsibility.

Professional Expertise

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall enhance their expertise and competency through career-long acquisition and refinement of knowledge, skills, abilities, and professional behaviors.

Societal Responsibility

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall participate in efforts to meet the health needs of people locally, nationally, and globally.

1. Respect

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall respect the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals.

Standards of Conduct:

- 1.1 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall not discriminate against any person.
- 1.2 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall protect patients' and clients' confidential information and not disclose that confidential information except as authorized by the patient or client or as permitted or required by law.

Aspirational Illustrative Examples:

- 1.A Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to acknowledge and respect an individual's known identity and culture.
- 1.B Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to recognize their explicit and implicit personal biases.

2. Integrity

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall act with professional integrity and responsibility, and fulfill their respective legal and ethical obligations.

Standards of Conduct:

- 2.1 The physical therapist shall retain full responsibility for all physical therapist services provided under the provisions of the physical therapist's license, including all aspects of the evaluation and management of the patient or client.
- 2.2 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall obtain ongoing informed consent after providing information that is understandable, honest, and necessary to allow the patient or client or their surrogate to make informed decisions about participation in physical therapist services or research.
- 2.3 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants having knowledge that, in their reasonable judgment, raises a substantial question as to whether a colleague is unfit to perform their professional responsibilities with competence and safety shall report this information to the appropriate authorities.
- 2.4 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall address known illegal or unethical acts by physical therapy personnel or that affect physical therapist services.
- 2.5 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall comply with applicable mandatory reporter laws for suspected cases of abuse, neglect, or exploitation involving children or vulnerable adults.
- 2.6 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants involved in research shall comply with accepted standards governing the protection of research participants.

Aspirational Illustrative Examples:

- 2.A Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to discourage misconduct by any physical therapy personnel or other health care professionals and make appropriate reports of known illegal or unethical acts, including verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual harassment.
- 2.B Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to demonstrate integrity in their relationships with patients and clients, families, colleagues, students, research participants, other health care providers, employers, payers, and the public.
- 2.C Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to ensure that they take appropriate action to address known illegal or unethical acts by physical therapy personnel or that affect physical therapist services, such as by speaking directly to the individual, consulting with mentors, or reporting the misconduct to a supervisor or relevant legal authority.

3. Accountability

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall be accountable for making sound professional judgments and decisions within the scope of practice established by laws and regulations.

Standards of Conduct:

- 3.1 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall not exceed their professional, jurisdictional, and personal scopes of practice and shall communicate with, collaborate with, or refer to a peer or other health care professionals when necessary.
- 3.2 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall practice without impairment from substance misuse and without impairment from cognitive deficiency or mental illness that, even with appropriate reasonable accommodation, adversely affects their practice.
- 3.3 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall comply with applicable local, state, and federal laws and regulations, including any duty to report when concerned about the safety of other individuals.

Aspirational Illustrative Examples:

- 3.A Physical therapists shall strive to demonstrate independent and objective professional judgment and make decisions in the patient's or client's best interests in all settings.
- 3.B Physical therapists shall strive to make professional judgments and decisions that are informed by professional standards, evidence, provider knowledge and experience, and patient and client values.
- 3.C Physical therapist assistants shall strive to make decisions in the patient's or client's best interests, in consultation with the physical therapist.
- 3.D Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to be accountable for the accuracy and truthfulness of information they disseminate, including in the use of emerging technologies, such as social media and artificial intelligence.

4. Maintaining Professional Relationships

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall respect the boundaries of professional, therapeutic, organizational, and personal relationships to promote a safe environment.

Standards of Conduct:

- 4.1 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall not abusively exploit persons over whom they have supervisory, evaluative, or other authority (e.g., patients and clients, students, supervisees, research participants, and employees).
- 4.2 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall not engage in any sexual relationship with any of their patients and clients, supervisees, or students.
- 4.3 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall not harass anyone verbally, physically, emotionally, or sexually.
- 4.4 Physical therapists shall provide reasonable notice and information about alternative sources for obtaining care if the physical therapist terminates the provider relationship while the patient or client continues to need physical therapist services.

Aspirational Illustrative Examples:

- 4.A Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall avoid initiating or entering into sexual relationships with individuals over whom they have significant influence on patients' and clients' care decisions and should refer patients and clients to other providers if an existing close personal or sexual relationship with such a person might influence or impinge on the integrity of the relationship between the provider and patient or client.
- 4.B Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to collaborate with patients and clients to empower them in making decisions about their health care.
- 4.C Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to create an inclusive and civil work environment that strives to promote each colleague's sense of belonging.
- 4.D Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to, as appropriate, encourage colleagues with physical, psychological, or substance-related impairments that may adversely impact their professional responsibilities to seek assistance or counsel.

5. Compassion and Trust

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall be trustworthy and compassionate in addressing the rights and needs of patients and clients.

Standards of Conduct:

- 5.1 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall provide the information necessary to allow patients and clients, or their surrogates, to make informed decisions about physical therapist services or participation in clinical research, including ensuring that information regarding the authorship of clinical documentation, patient education materials, publications, and presentations is truthful, accurate, and relevant.
- 5.2 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall address barriers to communication and comprehension with recipients of services, caregivers, students, and research participants.

Aspirational Illustrative Examples:

- 5.A Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to demonstrate care and compassion in the provision of physical therapist services.
- 5.B Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to be responsible and accountable for the use of respectful, accurate, and truthful written, verbal, and nonverbal communication in all forms, including social media.
- 5.C Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to recognize the public trust placed in them as health care professionals and maintain professional responsibility when information is disseminated using current and emerging technologies, including but not limited to social media and artificial intelligence.

6. Responsible Business and Organizational Practices

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall promote accountable and truthful organizational behaviors and business practices.

Standards of Conduct:

- 6.1 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall provide information about their services that is truthful and accurate and shall not make misleading representations in any forms of communication, including billing.
- 6.2 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall ensure that documentation for physical therapist services accurately reflects the provider, nature, and extent of the services provided.
- 6.3 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall disclose any conflicts of interest and not permit any conflicts of interest to interfere with professional judgments and decisions.
- 6.4 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall not, at any time, accept gifts or other considerations that influence or give an appearance of influencing their professional judgment and decision-making.
- 6.5 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall fully disclose any financial interest they have in products or services that they recommend to patients and clients or to the public.
- 6.6 Physical therapists shall ensure that patients and clients are informed of their financial obligations prior to incurring charges so that shared decision-making can be incorporated into the treatment plan.
- 6.7 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall not knowingly enter into or continue any employment or other arrangements that prevent them from fulfilling professional and ethical obligations to patients and clients.

Aspirational Illustrative Examples:

- 6.A Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to provide relevant and truthful information to current and prospective patients and clients about the services to be provided.
- 6.B Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to promote environments that support independent and accountable professional judgment as well as ethical and accountable decision-making.
- 6.C Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to seek compensation that supports the provision of legal, safe, and effective physical therapist services.

7. Direction and Supervision

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall provide appropriate and timely direction to and communication with anyone over whom they have legal supervisory responsibility.

Standards of Conduct:

- 7.1 Physical therapists shall ensure that all duties directed to other physical therapy personnel are congruent with the credentials, qualifications, competencies, and legal scope of practice or scope of work of the individual.
- 7.2 Physical therapist assistants shall provide physical therapist services under the direction and supervision of a physical therapist and shall communicate with the physical therapist when the patient's or client's status requires modification to the established plan of care.
- 7.3 Physical therapists shall exercise primary responsibility for the supervision of physical therapist assistants and support personnel.
- 7.4 Physical therapist assistants shall support and respect the supervisory role of the physical therapist to ensure quality of care and promote patient and client safety.
- 7.5 Physical therapist assistants shall take responsibility to communicate in a timely manner to the supervising physical therapist any areas in which they do not have the necessary level of knowledge and skill to practice safely and effectively.

Aspirational Illustrative Example:

- 7.A Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to take responsibility to mentor learners in order to help the learners develop knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes that will enable them to provide safe and effective care while embodying professionalism.

8. Professional Expertise

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall enhance their expertise and competency through career-long acquisition and refinement of knowledge, skills, abilities, and professional behaviors.

Standards of Conduct:

- 8.1 Physical therapists shall recognize and practice within the limits of their skills and competence and refer a patient or client to another health care professional when it is in the best interests of the patient or client.
- 8.2 Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall practice consistent with accepted current standards of care.

Aspirational Illustrative Examples:

- 8.A Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to develop and maintain competence and exercise appropriate care in using current and emerging technologies, including but not limited to social media and artificial intelligence.
- 8.B Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to engage in professional development based on critical self-assessment and reflection on changes in physical therapist practice, education, health care delivery, and technology.
- 8.C Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to evaluate the strength of evidence and applicability of content presented during professional development activities before integrating the content or techniques into practice, as appropriate to their professional roles.
- 8.D Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to cultivate and support practice environments that support professional development, career-long learning, and excellence.
- 8.E Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to reflect on and take action needed to maintain their own physical, emotional, and mental health, and seek outside assistance when needed.

9. Societal Responsibility

Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall participate in efforts to meet the health needs of people locally, nationally, and globally.

Aspirational Illustrative Examples:

- 9.A Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to provide resources to assist those who they believe are in harm's way.
- 9.B Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to recognize and address the multiple determinants of health that impact an individual's ability to optimize their own health and shall strive to provide appropriate suggestions to patients and clients of available community resources.
- 9.C Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to advocate to reduce health disparities and health care inequities, improve access to health care services, and address the health, wellness, and preventive health care needs of people.
- 9.D Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to recognize and respect the unique roles of other health professions and engage in interprofessional collaboration to meet the individual needs of people as well as improve access to appropriate services.
- 9.E Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to provide pro bono physical therapist services or support organizations that meet the needs of people who are economically disadvantaged, uninsured, or underinsured.
- 9.F Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to be responsible stewards of health care services and advocate for just utilization of those services, including taking action to reduce barriers to access.
- 9.G Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to educate the public about the scope of practice and benefits of physical therapy as part of interprofessional collaborative practice to protect and advance the health and well-being of individuals, communities, and populations.
- 9.H Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants shall strive to be good stewards of limited resources and take action to avoid unnecessary waste of those resources.