Unit 3: **The Transition from Personal to Professional Ethics**

**Lecture:**

Welcome, students! As you have learned in the previous 2-units, ethical dilemmas run the gamut from simple to complex. Behavior analysts are human beings and, as such, have reinforcement histories that have solidified their personal ethical standards. Many have engaged in little untruths designed to spare someone’s feelings or to kindly decline an invitation to a totally boring social function. Over time, these little untruths have been reinforced by allowing escape, or even gaining reinforcement, which can – as our reinforcement principle states – increase the future probability of the untruths. Simply stated, the foundations of our personal codes of ethics were laid in our youth and took on more serious implications and consequences as we approached adulthood.

Personal codes of ethics may work for individuals in day-to-day life, but we do not want the more relaxed personal codes to enter our professional lives as behavior analysts. We must learn the codes by which we are called to act and ensure that each situation we encounter as behavior analysts are examined through the lens of these codes.

For example, an applied behavior analysis (ABA) department in a very large non-profit agency decided it would be a great advertisement for the department to have tee shirts made with the agency name and logo and a cute “behavioral” saying on the back. Seems harmless enough, but is it? Wouldn’t that identify every individual and family with whom we work as receivers of ABA therapy? Could that be construed as a breach of confidentiality? Think about a situation in which a Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst (BCaBA) has been practicing for 6-months and, at a family gathering, is approached by her brother who asks for recommendations regarding handling his 6-year-old’s tantrum behaviors that include hitting, kicking walls, and screaming. Seems like some advice is needed! But, his sister can’t provide that advice. Behavior analysts do not offer ABA advice or therapy to family, friends, or others with whom they may have business connections. Providing even the most casual advice would breach Code 1.06: Multiple Relationships and Conflicts of Interest. As you can see, moving from a personal code of ethics to honoring our professional code may require not only a reset of our values but also a good working knowledge of our code and the many and varied ethical dilemmas that may occur.

Our code covers more than our work with our clients, it also covers our work with ABA colleagues and even non-behavior analytic professionals. Handling ethical dilemmas respectfully and according to our code can get complicated in such situations. For example, behavior analysts often meet at “round table” discussions with other professionals on client cases. Due to the widely varying education and experience of the professionals at the table, conversation can get heated quickly. Behavior analysts rely on research-based methods of treatment and some of those sitting at the table may be utilizing, or recommending, treatments that are not proven. How does one handle a situation in which one professional makes a recommendation that is not supported by the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) data and the hypothesized function of the behavior? It is often difficult for a behavior analyst to sit back and take a breath before responding to such recommendations. We can be pretty domineering about our own recommendations – and with good reason. They have been proven effective. But, we have to maintain a semblance of civility. It is important to acknowledge the other professionals’ views – but, we must not jeopardize our recommendations of research-based treatment to chase after unproven “rabbits.” The behavior analyst must be respectful, show the data that indicates behavior function, and explain why the behavior intervention plan (BIP) is the best choice of treatments – all without ruffling feathers.

Unfortunately, there are times when we must confront a colleague for an ethical violation. It doesn’t happen often, but when it does, we must use finesse in addressing the perceived violation. Our code requires us to monitor our colleagues’ ethical behavior and, as such, that can mean having a heart-to-heart conversation about a specific situation. One must go to the colleague first and, if the colleague corrects the behavior, all is well. If the colleague makes an excuse for the violation and does not correct the situation, then the behavior analyst has no choice but to go to the supervisor – or manager – or even, the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) to report the situation. In order to monitor our own, and our colleagues’, ethical behavior, we must be grounded in our Code! In fact, 10.06 of our code requires us to be familiar with our ethics codes. As you can see, having a working knowledge of the Code and steps we can take to resolve ethical dilemmas is a priority in professional practice!

Thank you for viewing this lecture!