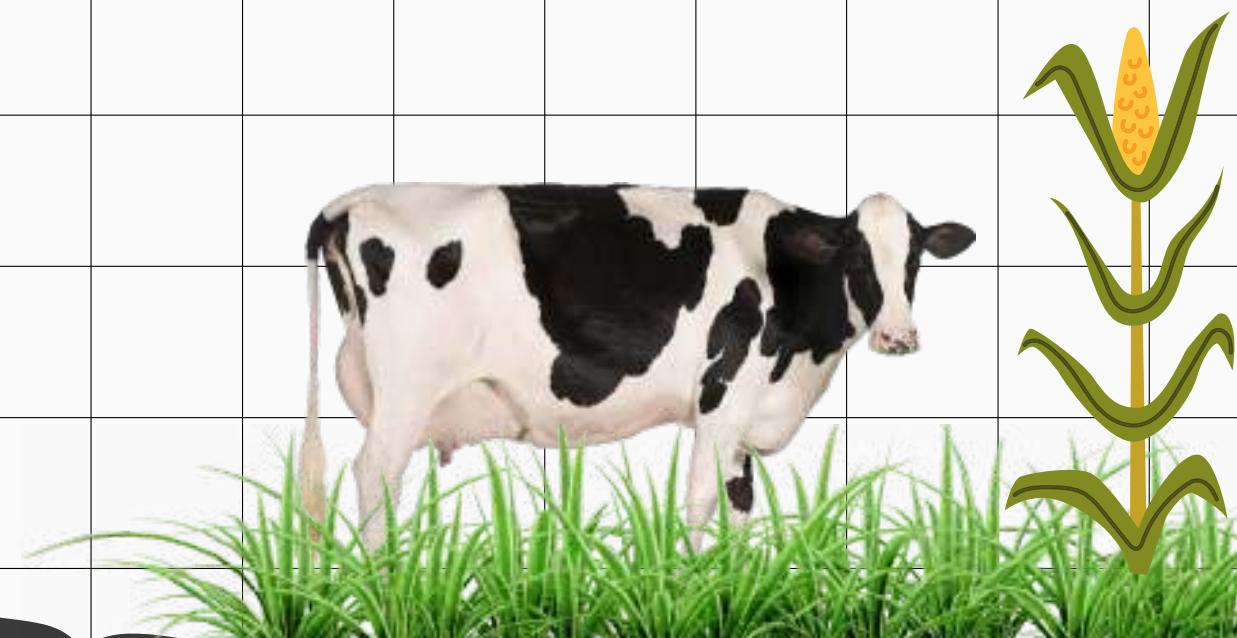




COFFEE, COWS, &



CONFIDENTIALITY

Navigating Rural Mental Health with Ethics, Humor, and Heart

Colby J. Odom, M.S.W., L.M.S.W.

Why Do Rural Ethics Matter?

Ethics are a foundational principle of the field of social work. As social workers, we are entrusted with individuals and family's dignity, rights, safety. We often work with the most vulnerable populations.

Ethical practice protects ourselves and our clients from harm. Ethics guide decision making in tough situations, and helps our field to maintain trust, credibility, and helps us stay accountable (Reamer 2023).

The NASW Code of Ethics provides the values and rural ethics act as our test. It is when these abstract questions become our daily practice. Ethical competence in rural practice is not necessarily measured by memorizing the NASW standards, but learning to apply them throughout practice.

This presentation is not the end all, be all. It is an effort to assist fellow social workers and students in applying ethics thoughtfully, consistently, and with humility. If curious, ASK. It is the only way to learn.

BACKGROUND

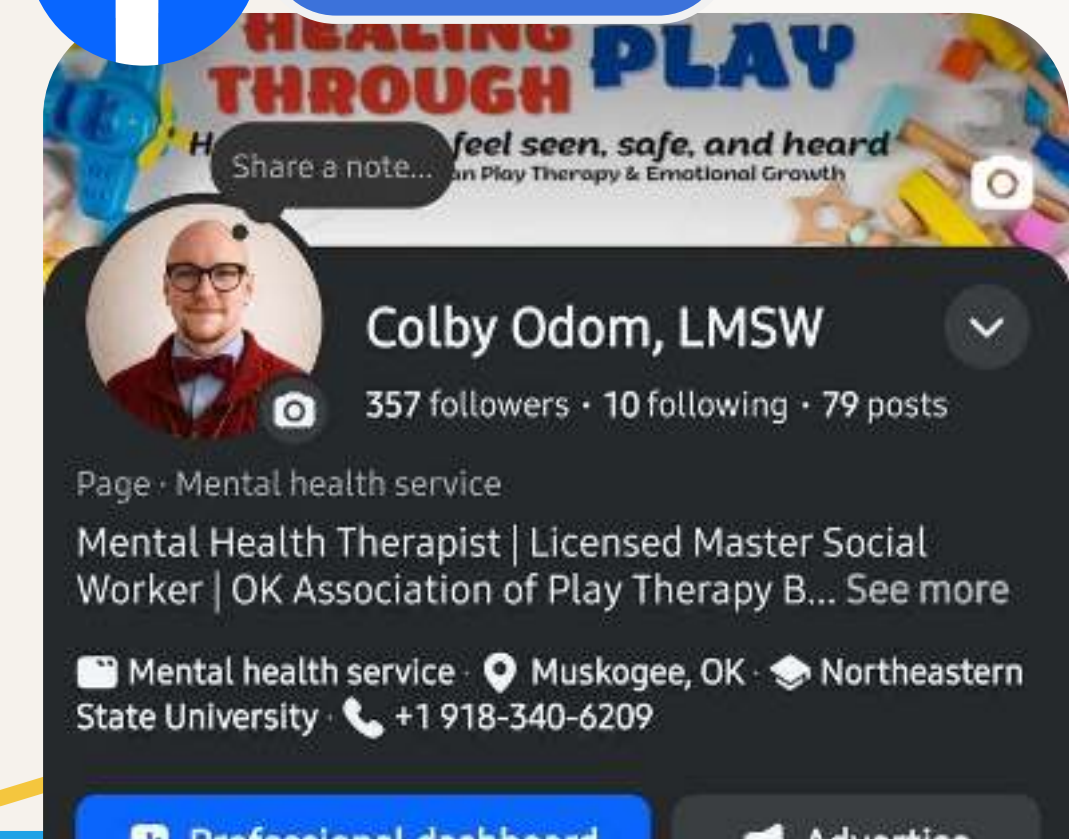
My name is Colby Odom, and I'm a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) currently practicing in rural Oklahoma. I currently provide behavioral health services to children, families, and college students in crisis intervention and community mental health.

Prior to this role, I worked in the fields of hospice and in child welfare. In 2023, I was recognized as Oklahoma's Hospice Social Worker of the Year after assisting in grief therapy following a brutal homicide that occurred in McAlester, OK. These experiences shaped my understanding of grief, trauma, and rural systems of care.

My clinical approaches are psychodynamic and client-centered. I have completed a two year advanced training in play therapy while working towards earning the credential of a Registered Play Therapist. I currently serve on the Oklahoma Association of Play Therapy's Board of Directors as the Continuing Education Director until 2027 and work under clinical supervision towards earning clinical licensure (LCSW).

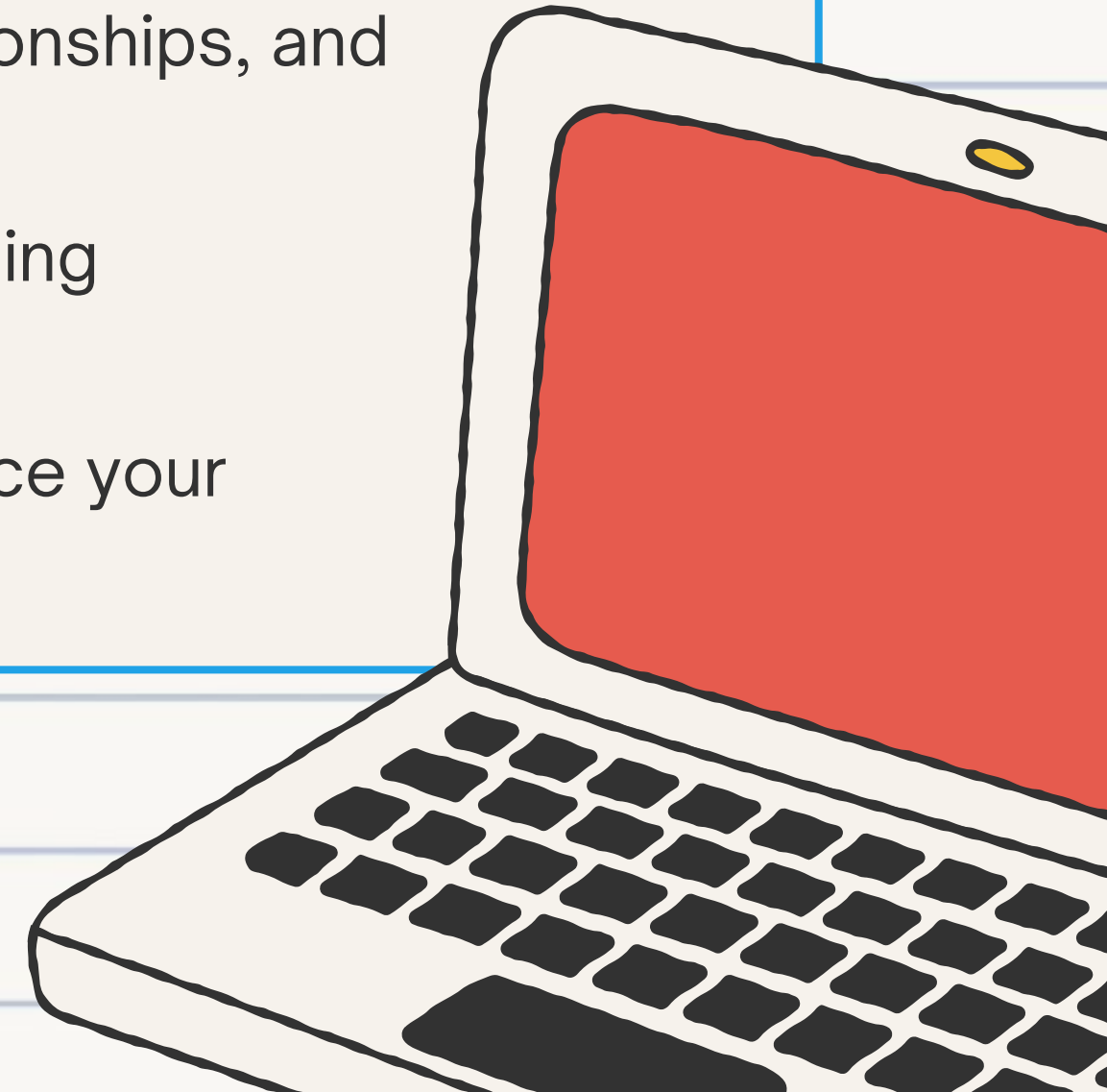


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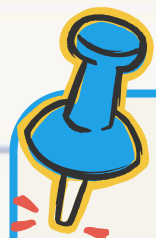


OBJECTIVES

- ☆ **Describe** unique ethical challenges encountered in rural social work practice
- ☆ **Apply** the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics to common rural practice dilemmas.
- ☆ **Recognize** how community culture, limited resources, dual relationships, and confidentiality influence ethical decision-making.
- ☆ **Develop** strategies for managing ethical dilemmas while maintaining professional integrity and client-centered care.
- ☆ **Reflect** on how your personal values, biases, and identity influence your ethical practice in rural communities.

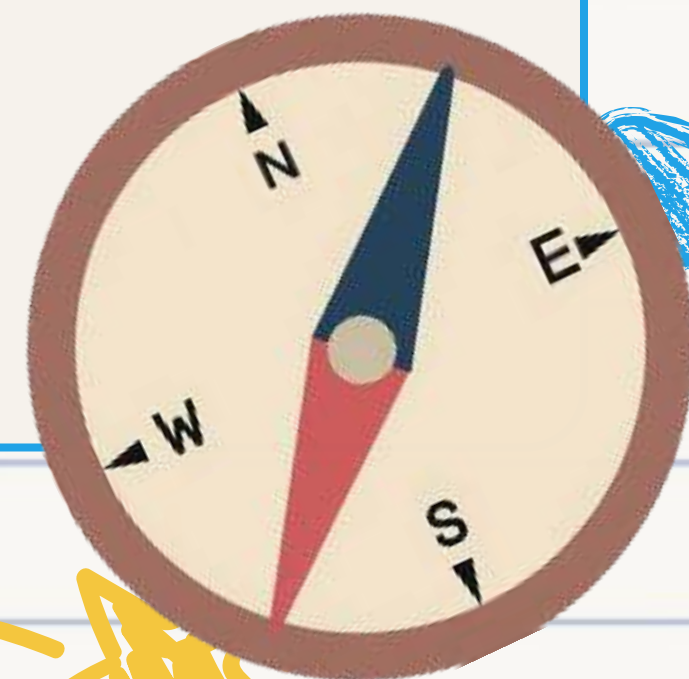


EXERCISE #1



Let's Go North!

Let's work together to discuss how this is relevant to social work ethics.



WHAT MAKES RURAL PRACTICE UNIQUE?

★ Overlapping Relationships

Rural social workers often live and work in the same areas as the client's they serve. As result, dual relationships present unique challenges that require proper boundaries and professionalism rather than simple avoidance (Pugh, 2007).

★ Confidentiality Challenges

Rural social workers often practice in very close-knit communities. With fewer providers and limited ability to stay anonymous, the risk will greatly increase that client's are using you for services. Privacy requires more planning and attention to prevent breaks in confidentiality (Galambos, et al. 2006).

★ Limited Resources and Workforce Shortages

Rural communities often have fewer access to professionals, fewer specialty services, longer distances to travel, and often face unique circumstances. We **must** make ethical decisions when specific services are unavailable (Palomin et al., 2023).

WHAT MAKES RURAL PRACTICE UNIQUE? CONT.

★ Community Culture

Rural practice requires understanding of the local community and local values. Family ties, privacy, and self-reliance and community connections are all a part of these values. Ethical practice means balancing our professional standards with the reality that is within the community. If you cannot stay confidential, seek guidance, file releases of information when appropriate and consult supervision (Palomin et al., 2023).

★ Greater Visibility

Most social workers are visible in their communities. Rural practice often places social workers in positions when their personal and professional lives are **intersecting**. Ethics can extend beyond the office walls and into everyday community life. This alone requires reflection, consultation, and professional judgement that is **ongoing** (Pugh, 2006).

Is avoiding dual relationships possible in rural practice? How might living in the same community impact the way you practice? What ethical challenges would you find the most difficult?

WHOSE VOICE?



Case Study

You are the clinician providing services in the rural community and practice within the school system.

A 14-year-old, Emma, has been seeing you a little over 6 months for depression and anxiety following the divorce of her parents. During your last session, she tells you that she just recently found out that she is currently pregnant. She begs you not to tell her parents because she fears being kicked out of the house. She reports no suicidal thoughts and no abuse. Emma says that she wants to continue with her pregnancy but needs time to figure out how to tell her family.

Later that afternoon, you are attending your child's volleyball game. While sitting in the stands, Emma's mother, who you attend church with, walks over and states, "You have been seeing my daughter, right? She has been acting strange lately. I know you can't tell me much, but is there anything I should be worried about?" Before you answer, the principle (who serves on the local school board with you) joins the conversation and says, "We are all worried about her. If there is something that we need to know to keep students safe, you should tell us."

As you are leaving, your clinical supervisor sends you a text message, "Call me tonight. I heard there is a situation brewing with one of your adolescent clients."



WHOSE VOICE?



Agency Voice

What keeps my employer out of trouble?



Legal Voice

What protects my liability?



Ethical Voice

What best upholds the NASW Code of Ethics?



Community Voice

What does the town expect me to do?



Parent Voice

What would I want if this were my own child?



Emma's Voice

What best respects Emma's dignity and self-determination?

I do not want you to tell me **what** you would do. I want you to tell me **whose voice** made the decision

GROUPS

DISCUSSION



WE'LL BE RIGHT BACK

DEBRIEF

Did every group reach the same exact conclusion?

Did anyone have a solution that honors every ethical obligation?

Who believes that Emma's pregnancy should remain confidential?

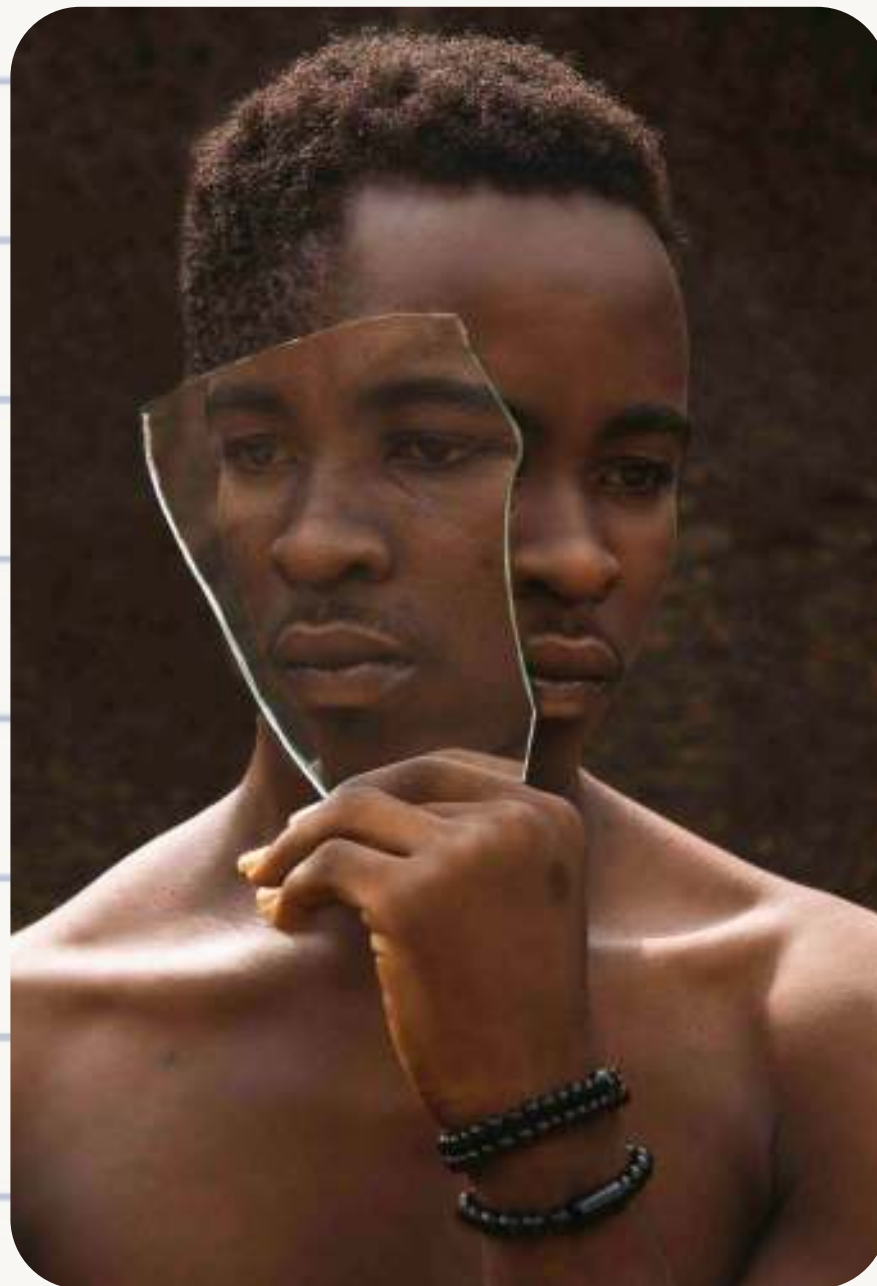
Who believes that the parents should know immediately?

Did anyone change their mind after hearing another group's reasoning?

How do personal values impact ethical judgement?

When all of these competing values collide... Who are we responsible to **first**?

REFLECTION



The people that we have the privilege of serving will rarely remember the theories that you use or the interventions that you choose.

Every single time, they will experience your ethics.

Ethics are not always what you know or what you say. Ethics are what you do when no one can tell you answer.

The goal of ethical decision making is not to memorize a series of steps. It is to justify your decisions using the NASW Code of Ethics, law, and sound clinical judgement.

DUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Dual relationships are sometimes unavoidable in rural communities and require careful attention.

For example, we may see clients at church, on the same sports team with our children, shopping at the same grocery store, or even go to the same schools.

The ethical question is not a matter of avoidance, but becomes “How do I manage these relationships in ways that protect my clients?”

Visibility is part of ethical practice. Clients can and will observe how you speak, how to treat people, what you say online and publicly, and how you behave when upset (Pugh, 2007), (Campbell et al., 2023), (Galambos et al., 2006).



DUAL RELATIONSHIPS CONT.

Dual relationships are noted within the NASW Code of Ethics. The NASW recognizes that dual relationships may not be avoidable in every situation.

Questions to consider in these situations are

- Is there any exploitation as a part of the relationship?
- Is there any risk of harm?
- Can I maintain appropriate boundaries?
- Am I following the NASW Code of Ethics?

Rural clinicians benefit from having supervision, peer consultation, documentation, and thoughtful decision making. It is not a question of intelligence, but rural practice often manages complex systems (Pugh, 2007), (Campbell et al., 2023), (Galambos et al., 2006).



CONFIDENTIALITY CHALLENGES



Limited Anonymity

In a rural community, seeing someone walking into a therapy clinic can reveal that person is seeking services. Even in the waiting area or recognizing vehicles.

Best practice is to always discuss confidentiality first. Allow the client to decide what happens if seen in public. Consider scheduling changes for maximum privacy.

Public Encounters

What do you do when you see your client at Walmart? At church? Your favorite restaurant or coffee shop?

Best practice is to always discuss this upon intake. “If we see each other in public, I will not acknowledge you unless you initiate to protect your privacy.”

CONFIDENTIALITY CHALLENGES CONT.



Information Sharing

In a rural communities, clinicians can often hear information about client's outside of therapy. This can happen publicly such as the school system and family members.

Is it ethical to use information learned outside of the therapeutic relationship to influence your decisions?

Best Practices

Verify information from the client and directly with the client whenever possible.

Document, document, document all information *and the source of information*.

Do not act based on rumors or gossip (Green & Mason, 2002), (Galambos et al., 2006).

SELF AWARENESS & COUNTERTRANSFERENCE



Know Your Values

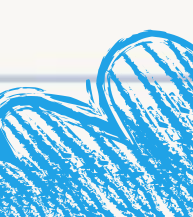
Research shows that our beliefs, values, experiences, and relationships impact our practice significantly. We all bring our own identities and biases to practice. It is essential for social workers to use self-reflection as a professional skill (Wednt et al., 2012).

Recognize Countertransference Early

When you know someone's family, go to the same school, attend the same church, or share similar life experiences, the social worker must acknowledge this and understand that it will impact reactions and blur objectivity.

Reflect Before You Act

Ask yourself often, "Why do I feel this way?", "Is this about the client or is it about me?", "How will this impact my judgement?". Self-awareness is an ethical safeguard. Use clinical supervision. It is there to protect the social worker and the client (Riebschleger, 2007).



SOME OF THE GREATEST
ETHICAL RISK IN RURAL
PRACTICE IS NOT WHAT YOU
KNOW ABOUT YOUR CLIENT.
IT IS WHAT YOU
HAVE NOT
RECOGNIZED ABOUT
YOURSELF.

STRATEGY AND TAKEAWAYS

Know the Code and Think Beyond It.

Rural practice requires balancing and understanding. Sometimes, we may not be able to find an exact “right” answer. It is crucial to know and refer to the NASW Code of Ethics often.

Build Professional Relationships and Consult Early & Often.

If you are uncertain... Consult with your supervisor. Seek out peer consultation and always use ethical decision making. Do not make difficult decisions alone or in isolation.

Document, Document, Document!

Good and clean documentation should explain the entire dilemma (if there is one), what options could have been considered, if the situation or question involved consultation, and the rationale and ethical reasoning for the decision that was chosen.

Protect Your Boundaries & Practice Self-Reflection.

Rural practice requires us to have thoughtful boundary management rather than assume there will not be overlapping relationships. Always ask yourself what emotions and assumptions that you bring into practice? How will this impact your judgement? It is not just a clinical skill. It is an ethical safeguard (Cole et al., 2025), (Arnold & Szumer, 2023), (Cashwell & Moran, 2024).

FINAL TAKEAWAY AND QUESTIONS

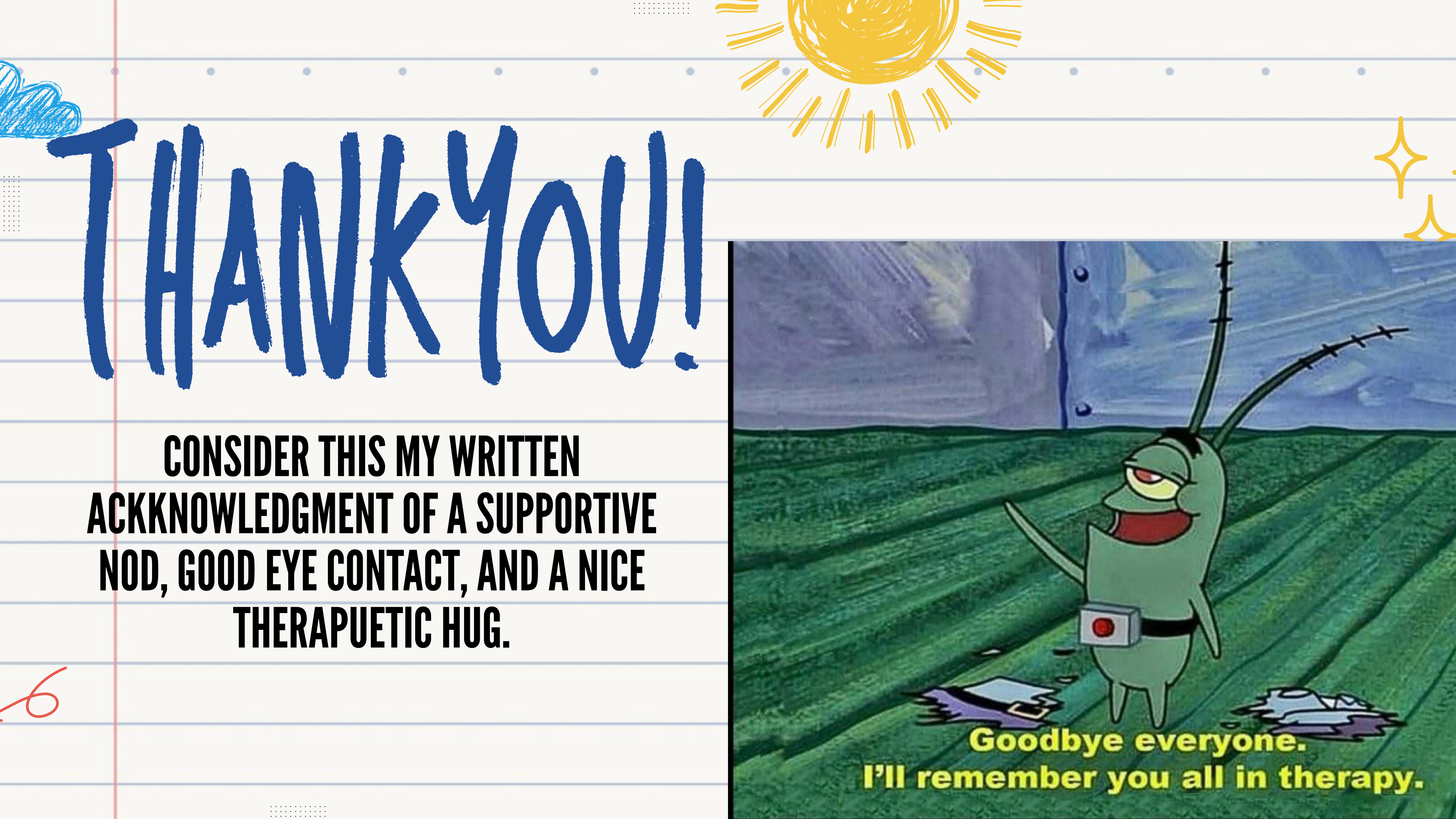
The goal of ethical practice in rural settings is not to be able to avoid ethical dilemmas or questions. The ultimate goal is to be able to navigate complex systems with integrity, humility, consultation, and sound professional judgement while abiding by the NASW Code of Ethics.

Five years from now, what do you hope that your community says about you, not only as a clinician and social worker, but as a person?

ANY QUESTIONS?

SHOULD WE GO IN TURN AND TALK ABOUT HOW THIS PRESENTATION MADE US FEEL? OR SHOULD WE SIT IN SILENCE AND PROCESS OUR FEELINGS ABOUT IT?

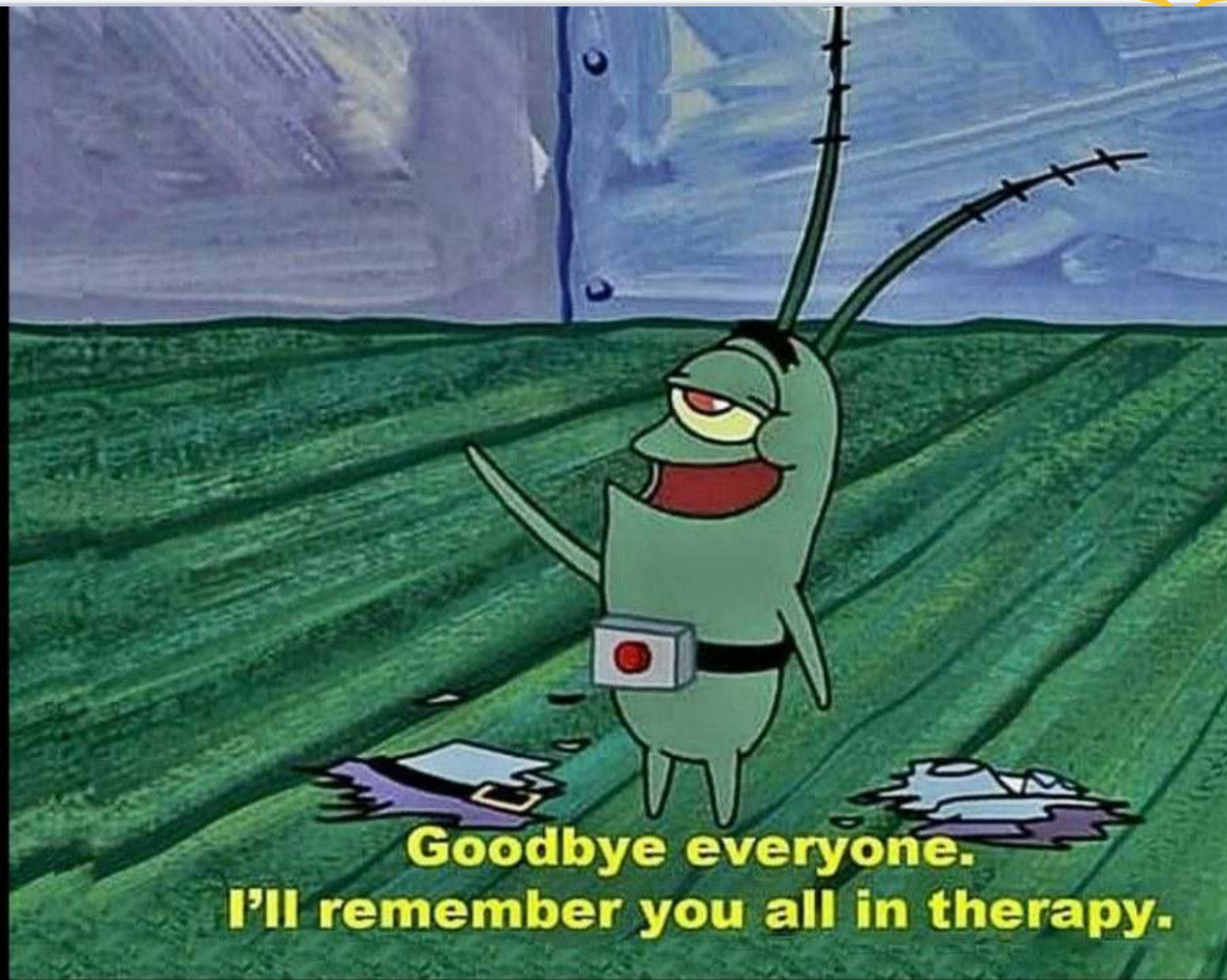




THANK YOU!

**CONSIDER THIS MY WRITTEN
ACKKNOWLEDGMENT OF A SUPPORTIVE
NOD, GOOD EYE CONTACT, AND A NICE
THERAPUETIC HUG.**

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**Goodbye everyone.
I'll remember you all in therapy.**

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