THE SOCIAL WORK TOOLKIT

QUICK GUIDE

Avoiding Burnout

Introduction

The caring professions, for example, medicine, teaching and social work, are associated with high levels of work-related stress but there is some evidence to suggest that social workers are especially vulnerable to stress and burnout (Lloyd et al., 2002; 2005). Two recent commentators (MacLean, 2011; van Heugten, 2011) provide helpful definitions of *stress*, *distress*, *trauma*, *fatigue* and *burnout* in social work but the term used here is *burnout* because the word has entered the common language of social work (van Heugten, 2011) and seems to characterise many of the job-related problems that social workers face.

Understanding burnout

The work of American psychologist Christina Maslach and her colleagues offers a useful starting point for developing our understanding of burnout (Maslach, 2003: 2):

> Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (*sic*) and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people-work' … it is a response to the chronic emotional strain of dealing with other human beings particularly when they are troubled …

The definition suggests that all 'people-workers' are at risk because of the intense and personal nature of their work. Certainly, social work *is* stressful because working alongside traumatised, excluded and angry people takes its toll on the strongest of us. Grant and Kinman (2011) highlight the dangers associated with individual interpretations of burnout, however, and, since beginning her exploration of burnout in the 1970s, Maslach has emphasised the need to scrutinise situations and organisations rather than individuals (Maslach, 2003). Social work is shaped by public and political expectations, not all of which take account of professional values and interests or recognise the structural rather than personal nature of so many of the difficulties service users face. Social workers, as a result, experience ongoing struggles to secure acceptable working conditions for themselves and good-enough services for users. For example, if we look at the last 30 years or so, we can see that governments in the UK, Europe and the USA have embarked on a political and economic programme to strengthen market capitalism (Harvey, 2005). The damaging effects of neoliberal change on society, in terms of growing inequality and social problems (Dorling and Thomas, 2011; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010), are well-documented, as are the implications for social work in terms of increased managerial control and decreased professional autonomy and satisfaction (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). From 2008 also, social work has faced additional

problems as the worst economic crisis since the 1930s paved the way for public service cuts and inequitable changes to tax and benefit systems.

As Maslach et al. argue (2001: 409), 'burnout is more of a social phenomenon than an individual one.' There are demographic factors (particularly age, where older workers seem less at risk of burnout than their younger colleagues) and personality factors (for example, people who have low self esteem and poor internal coping mechanisms appear more prone to burnout than their more confident, resilient counterparts) but the research evidence is not strong (Maslach et al., 2001). In short, burnout is more strongly associated with characteristics within organisations and wider society (Lloyd et al., 2002; MacLean, 2011; Maslach, 2003; Maslach et al., 2001; van Heugten, 2011):

- work overload;
- role conflict and ambiguity;
- lack of supervisory and management support;
- lack of information, autonomy and control;
- lack of career development, job satisfaction and job security;
- lack of funding and resources;
- poor staff retention rates and staffing shortages;
- public and political criticism of social work and service users;
- frequent policy and practice changes.

Avoiding and overcoming burnout

As van Heugten (2011: 194) argues, social workers can take 'small steps at grassroots level' to overcome the factors associated with burnout. At the same time, employers and politicians have a responsibility to reduce the risk of burnout by creating and maintaining the kind of organisations and structures that work best to support and value social workers and to provide sensitive and helpful services for users. What this means is that the factors associated with burnout can be challenged at individual, social, organisational and policy levels (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009; Maclean, 2011; Maslach, 2003; Webb and Carpenter, 2011; Westbrook et al., 2006; van Heugten, 2011). Individually, we can:

1. understand more about the causes and effects of burnout so that we can recognise when stress is becoming harmful;

2. look after ourselves in terms of work–life balance;

3. develop skills in time management;

4. take time to explore the meaning of our work for ourselves and others – reflection and reflexivity are important, as is mindfulness (being aware of ourselves in the present, in our current surroundings);

5. set realistic goals – we tend to have high expectations of what we should offer service users yet need to acknowledge that we cannot do it all;

6. request (demand!) supervision that is effective in terms of the emotional content of the work and professional development;

7. ensure managers know when stress levels become unacceptable;

8. highlight excessive workloads and unhelpful, bureaucratic systems;

9. be aware, take notice and learn how to say 'No!'

Adopting individual responses to the pressures workers face makes it easier, however, for particular people to be labelled as 'problematic', 'intransigent' and 'resistant to change and progress'. Instead, collective action is likely to be more effective. Therefore, we can:

1. seek support from family, friends and colleagues – peer support is a vital response to processes of individualisation and alienation in the workplace;

2. ensure we join our workplace trade union;

3. take up opportunities to share experiences with colleagues and other professionals –such as commitment to training and continued professional development;

4. explore opportunities to work alongside service users (*with* rather than *on behalf of*) in ways that reconnect us with social work values associated with human rights and social justice (IFSW / IASSW / ICSW, 2012) – prioritise practice that is relationship-based, identifies with the personal and social struggles that service users face, and operates at group and community as well as individual levels;

5. forge alliances – for example, the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) is an association of social work practitioners, academics, students and service users united in their concern that social work is being undermined by managerialism and marketisation, by the stigmatisation of service users and by welfare cuts and restrictions (www.socialworkfuture.org).

Taking individual and collective action to help us avoid work-related stress and burnout enables us to retain (or regain) some control over our personal and professional lives. It is important, though, that managers also contribute. Effective managers can:

1. be creative in terms of staff development and progression opportunities;

2. offer supportive supervision, which recognises workers' skills and hard work;

3. resist pressure from more senior managers to allocate all work and to set unrealistic timescales and targets;

4. create team working, joint working and peer support opportunities;

5. promote autonomy – trust staff to do the job for which they were educated;

6. ensure schemes are in place to support and mentor new workers, especially newly qualified workers.

Conclusion

The point to emphasise in relation to burnout is that it is *not* inevitable. Both research evidence and experience suggest that good practice is on offer in many organisations, where people who are struggling receive the support they need from energised and committed workers (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009; Rogowski, 2012). Social work remains a positive experience for many; it is a demanding job but workers are resilient, cope well and know when and how to seek support (Collins, 2008). Social workers should not be expected just to 'get on with the job' when their working environment is stressful to the extent that health and wellbeing are at risk, however. Nor should users have to accept increasingly residual, resource-led services. Where agencies fall down in terms of staff support and service provision, there is action to be taken and it is important to remember that strength often lies in collective rather than individual responses.

This quick guide has been written by Rona Woodward, Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Stirling.

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The College of Social Work: http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org/pcf.aspx (website links to all materials of the Professional Capability Framework and Assessed Year in Employment).