

Self Care: The Ethical Imperative for Helping Professionals

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The Purpose of this Session

This Session will:

- (1) Explain and contextualize burnout.
- (2) Explain the empirically-based facilitators to burnout among social work faculty and students.
- (3) Explain up to 15 empirically-based professional approaches to self-care among those in helping professions.
- (4) Discuss the policy, practice and research implications of burnout among social work faculty and students.

Additional Components of Session:

This session will also include the following:

- (1) A “Self-Care Assessment” break-out session with participants; and,
- (2) An opportunity to de-brief and discussion of findings.

Introduction: What is Burnout?

The term was coined in the early 1970s by American Psychologist and author of *The High Cost of High Achievement*, Herbert Freudenberger.

Of burnout, Dr. Frudenberger said:

“Burnout really is a response to stress. It's a response to frustration. It's a response to a demand that an individual may make upon themselves in terms of a requirement for perfectionism or drive.”

Introduction: What is Burnout?

- A 2017 study by the Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care defined burnout as: “consequences of severe stress, and high ideals in helping professions” (IQEHC, 2017).
- For example, doctors and nurses who sacrifice themselves for others, would often end up being *burned out* – exhausted, listless, and unable to cope.
- As we know, doctors as nurses are not the only “helping professionals” who experience burn out.

Social Work: The Helping Profession

- By definition, our role as social workers is to: “is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people” (NASW, 2017).
- The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), reports that social work is one of the fastest growing careers in the United States (USDOL, 2017).
- Between 2014 and 2024, the profession is expected to grow by 12% (USDOL, 2017)
- In 2014, there were almost 650,000 social work jobs (USDOL, 2017).

Social Work Education by the Numbers: The Students

- In 2015, there were 55,454 full-time social work majors enrolled in social work programs. Data were compiled from 469 schools across the United States.
- There were an average of 118.2 students per program.
- There were 7,514 part-time social work majors enrolled as of fall 2015 in the 244 programs that provided this information, with an average of 30.8 students

Social Work Education by the Numbers: The Students

- A total of 45,837 social work degrees were awarded for the 2014–2015 academic year.
- 42.8% were baccalaureate degrees, 56.5% were master's degrees, and 0.8% were doctoral (practice doctorate and PhD) degrees.
- This finding suggests that the role of social work education: students enrolling in social work programs and professors teaching in those the classroom is more imperative than ever.

Stress at Work: How Do Social Workers Cope?

- The most comprehensive social work report that explains burnout was from an NASW Workforce study: “Stress at Work: How Do Social Workers Cope?”
- It was a study was a national, cross-sectional study of 3,653 licensed clinical social workers/NASW members. It identified variables that lead to work-related stress, which leads to burnout.

Findings: How Do Social Workers Cope?

1. The lack of time to complete tasks
2. Heavy workloads contributed to their stress
3. Working with difficult or challenging clients
4. Low salaries
5. Low compensation
6. Too many responsibilities
7. Completing mundane tasks
8. Limited advancement opportunities
9. Long work hours

Findings: How Do Social Workers Cope?

10. Low resources

11. Unclear job expectations

12. No work-life-balance

Student Responsibilities

- Social work students are expected to:

become acclimated to college and university life, attend classes, manage internship and family responsibilities, and prepare for entry into graduate school and/or the professional workforce.

- The mental, physical, emotional, financial and time commitment required to manage one's professional, social, academic, and family obligations while pursuing a full-time education can be overwhelming and lead to student burnout.

Facilitators to Burnout among Students

1. High workload & role demands
2. Performance anxiety and frequent evaluation by others
3. Lack of experience/mastery
4. Peer competition
5. Imposter syndrome
6. Boundary issues
7. Ethical quandaries
8. Institutional demands
9. Dealing with criticism
10. Secondary Traumatic Stress
11. Countertransference
12. managing interpersonal and professional relationships

Statement of the Problem

- Social workers strive to help meet the basic human needs of all people, but the rigor, the caseloads, the time and personal energy commitment, the rewarding, yet laborious work with clients, the advocacy work, the training, research and certification requirements, and the intellectual competence it takes to work in our high-paced demanding field can lead to burnout *not only among social work practitioners, but also among social work educators and students.*
- Limited empirically based social work research has investigated burnout among social work educators and students.

The Three Stages of Burnout

STAGE I: STRESS AROUSAL

- Stress arousal includes physiological and psychological responses.
- Some of these include persistent irritability, persistent anxiety, periods of high blood pressure, *bruxism* (the grinding of teeth during sleep), insomnia, and forgetfulness.
- Additionally, one can experience heart palpitations, unusual heart arrhythmia, concentration problems, headaches/stomach problems, and acute gastrointestinal symptoms.
- With the presence of any two of these, you may be experiencing stage 1 stress arousal.

The Three Stages of Burnout

- **STAGE II: ENERGY CONSERVATION**

- Energy conservation **attempts to compensate for stress.**

- If those strategies fail, consequences might include excessive lateness; procrastination; excessive time off; sexual dysfunction (desire, performance); persistent tiredness; social withdrawal from friends and family; increased cynicism; resentment; increased substance use (nicotine, caffeine, alcohol, prescription drugs); excessive apathy; and lack or loss of spirituality.

- The presence of any two symptoms may indicate Stage II burnout.

The Three Stages of Burnout

- **STAGE III: EXHAUSTION**

- The exhaustion stage is where most people finally get a sense that something may be wrong.
- Exhaustion can lead to increased risk of unethical behavior related to client care.
- The symptoms include: chronic sadness or depression, chronic stomach or bowel problems, chronic mental fatigue, chronic physical fatigue, chronic headaches or migraines, the desire to "drop out" of society... the desire to get away from family, friends, and even recurrent suicidal ideation.
- The presence of any two of these symptoms may indicate Stage III burnout.

Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, and Compassion Fatigue

- **Burnout** is an outcome of a demanding job environment and the inability to manage too many responsibilities.
- **Vicarious Trauma or Secondary Stress** exposure is a result of being exposed to client's traumatic experiences.
- **Compassion fatigue** is when a practitioner changes feelings toward clients, loses interest, compassion and or work satisfaction, and begins to doubt one's abilities and chosen profession.

Self-Care: The Ethical Imperative

- In her 2011 article, *Remembering You: Self-Care for Social Workers*, Linda Monk wrote:
“I believe **self-care is an ethical imperative for social workers** given the innate occupational hazards relevant within our field including job stress, professional burnout, primary trauma, vicarious trauma and compassion.”

What is Self-Care?

- Self-care is **an essential social work survival skill**.
- Self-care refers to **activities and practices** that we can engage in on a regular basis to reduce stress and maintain and **enhance our short- and longer-term health and well-being**.
- **Self-care is necessary** for your effectiveness and success in honoring your professional and personal commitments.

The Aims of Self-Care

There are common aims to almost all self-care efforts:

- (1) Taking care of physical and psychological health
- (2) Managing and reducing stress
- (3) Honoring emotional and spiritual needs
- (4) Fostering and sustaining relationships
- (5) Achieving an equilibrium across one's personal, school, and work lives

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach One: Develop a Self-Care Plan

- A self-care plan is commitment to yourself honor yourself first and establish healthy boundaries in your home, professional, and social environments.
- It is a commitment to prioritize yourself and attend to your physical and psychological health, emotional and spiritual needs, and relationships.
- Some of the questions you may ask when developing your plan include:
What displeases me now? What adjustments can I make? Or, what makes me happy?

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Two: Detox from Technology

- The overuse of technology can lead to: a warped sense of reality, bullying, stress, obesity, depression, isolation, a lack of empathy, and a lack of social boundaries.
- Set healthy time limits for your use of devices, gadgets, social media and other technological devices.
- Use free time to reconnect with yourself.

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Three: Practice Mindfulness

“Mindfulness is the practice of paying close attention to what we are experiencing in the present, both inside our bodies and minds and in the external world.”

(Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994, 2012; Nhat Hanh, 1975; Rosenberg, 1998; Santorelli, 1999).

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Four: Rebalance Your Work Load

- Find time for yourself every day. do one nourishing activity each day.
- This could be having a 30 minute bath with no distractions, going out to a movie, or it could simply mean taking 10 minutes during a quiet time to sit and relax.
- Don't wait until all the dishes are done and the counter is clean to take time off.
- Take it when you can, and make the most of it.
- Even small changes can make a difference in a busy educator and/student's life.

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Five: Have a Transition from Work to Home

Do you have a transition time between work and home? Do you have a 20 minute walk home through a beautiful park or are you stuck in traffic for two hours? Do you walk in the door to chaos or do you walk into a peaceful house?

Do you have a transition process when you get home? Do you change clothes?

One of their best strategies involved a transition ritual of some kind: putting on cozy clothes when getting home and mindfully putting their work clothes “away” as in putting the day away as well, having a 10 minute quiet period to shift gears, going for a run.

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Seven: Learn to say no (or yes) more often

- Are you the person who ends up on all the committees at work? Are you on work-related boards? Do you volunteer in the helping field as well as work in it? Are you the crisis/support line to your friends and family?
- Do you say yes to more work related things and no to the things that make you happy and fulfilled?
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- Take a moment to reflect on these questions and see where you fit best: Do you need to learn to say no or yes more often?

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Eight: Assess Your Trauma Inputs

- Starting at home, what does your day begin with? Watching morning news on tv? Listening to the radio or reading the paper? Note how many disturbing images, difficult stories, actual images of dead or maimed people you come across.
- Now look at your work and academic environments, what are you listening to and or watching?
- It is important to recognize the amount of trauma information that we unconsciously absorb during the course of a day.

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Eight: Organize/Join a Peer Support Group

- Organize or join a social support group with (email and/or phone).
- This can be as small as a group of three colleagues or students who meet once a month or once a week to debrief and offer support to one another.
- Seek counseling and therapy as needed. Often, social workers encourage their clients and students to see mental health counseling. But, in some instances, we, too need a safe space to talk. Take the time you need to engage in self-care.

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Nine: Work Part-Time or Attend School Part Time

- Consider working part time and/or attending school part time.
- This has been proven to help address compassion fatigue.

Professional Approaches To Self-care

Approach Ten: Exercise

- We tell our clients and studies how important physical exercise is. Do you do it on a regular basis?
- Can you think of three small ways to increase your physical activity?
- Set realistic goals. Get a partner and get moving!

Implications

- It is the responsibility of our profession to shift the culture around self-care.
- Change the culture and the conversations that say: give more of yourself to everyone else, while saving none of you, for you.
- Social workers must learn set health boundaries for themselves by (1) creating a self-care plan of action and (2) by implementing self-care strategies into their daily routines.

Implications

- Allocate federal resources to implement train the trainer modules on self-care in the workplace.
- Social work departments and businesses are encouraged to incorporate self-care into their teaching pedagogy and overall practice.

Implications

- Unfortunately, extreme burnout can lead social workers to feel (1) overwhelmed, displeased with the social work profession, (3) feel there is a lack of support, (4) depersonalize their interactions with clients (5) grow disinterested in the field, (5) experience emotional exhaustion and (6) eventually leave the field of social work.
- Conversations about self-care, burnout, vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue should not be things that are *discussed passing*.
- Instead, their real-life implications of burnout on the lives of social work practitioners, educators, students and researchers should be openly discussed.
- And the subsequent impact it has on clients should be discussed.

Implications

- Most important, the impact of a burn out among members of the social work profession and appropriate interventions should be explored.
- The need to establish foundational literature in this area still exists.

Question and Answer Session

Thank you for your patience. . .

De-Briefing/Findings

Thank you for sharing. . .

Conclusion

You may reach me at:

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References can be provided upon request.

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Thank you and have a wonderful day.

Please be sure to evaluate this session.