STRESS BUSTERS – WHAT HELPS SOCIAL WORKERS AND WHY?

Jo Moriarty

Jill Manthorpe
Recently completed literature review for Professional Standards Authority. Also relates to ongoing work on recruitment and retention in social care and debates about compassion and compassion fatigue.
LONGSTANDING TOPIC IN SOCIAL WORK
INTERNATIONALLY CONSISTENT RESULTS

Burnout in social workers treating children as related to demographic characteristics, work environment, and social support

When work and family are in conflict: impact on psychological strain experienced by social workers in Australia

Sinking, swimming and sailing: experiences of job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion in child welfare employees

Symptoms of posttraumatic stress among child welfare workers who experience a maltreatment fatality on their caseload

12 March 2015
BUT NOW INCREASED PUBLICITY

• Results from community Care and TMP Survey in October 2014

• Context of:
  • reduced expenditure on social care
  • Increased demand for services (adults and children)
SOME UNTANGLING NEEDED

How is stress being measured? Who was included in the research and how were they recruited? How does it compare with the general population or other professionals? What about separating out work related and other stressors?
MEASURED IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Environmental
- Identifying life events associated with stress
- What experiences might make you vulnerable to experiencing stress?

Psychological
- Focus on how stressors are perceived
- Increases or changes in behaviour (e.g. alcohol use)

Biological
- Physiological responses to stress (e.g. cortisol levels)
- BUT may change for other non-stress related reasons
• Need to recognise different theoretical and conceptual models exist

• Must appraise quality of research being reported

• Results may be affected by:
  • Sampling – who was included, who was missed out
  • How stress/burnout was measured
  • If study could distinguish between work related and non work related factors
What are the factors that have emerged as important in research?
TO START US OFF

From your experience, what are some of the reasons why social workers may experience stress?
CPS workers are often the first people to come into contact with an abused and/or neglected child and may work extensively with this client and the family. Working so intensely with the child’s experience would be a risk factor of developing compassion fatigue (Bourassa 2012).

Workers often feel distressed by the repeated exposure to traumatic material in the agency’s attempts to understand what “went wrong” (Douglas 2012).

Daily, social workers face the busy and complex world of human behaviour in social contexts—a world in which relationships break down, emotions run high and personal needs go unmet (Hamama 2012).
WORKLOADS

• Our 2009 survey using time diaries (Baginsky et al, 2009) showed many workers did equivalent of an extra day a week over their contracted hours

• Challenge to find ways of matching individual caseloads and workloads

Most nights I wake up in the night worrying about work I have not had time to do. I struggle to enjoy life outside work as I’m so exhausted

(worker in Community Care TMP survey)
The challenges and changes that are occurring in the health care environment have produced job demands and expectations that are incompatible with workers’ expectations about how they want to use their skills and function at work (Acker & Lawrence 2009).

... with stress deriving in particular from role conflict between client advocacy and meeting agency needs (Lloyd et al 2002).

Social work is often characterised by a combination of high demands and limited resources, and therefore innate conflicts can be seen as a natural part of the work (Blomberg et al 2014).
WHAT HELPS?

Need to focus on what interventions would help instead of repeating research about problems
WHAT HELPS?

From your experience, what are some of the things that your organisation does (could do) to help reduce stress?
Research on turnover has repeatedly shown that supervisor and co-worker support can buffer the effect of burnout and turnover (McFadden et al 2014).

Supervisors who are open and responsive to the opinions of frontline social workers about their job-specific problems can help those workers to cope with job demands (Kim et al 2011).

One aspect of supervision that was predictive of high levels of stress perceived that one’s supervision was primarily geared to protecting supervisors (Lloyd et al 2002).
Social support groups can revitalize and enhance members’ capacities to adapt to current challenges and cope more effectively with future stressful life events. They can also mobilize to help members advocate for structural changes at their workplaces or for the profession as a whole (Meier 2002).

Social support can be an important coping mechanism that can reduce the negative effects of stressors [but] others argue that such effects can only occur in the context of a positive work culture which values employees performing equally well in both their work and family roles (Kalliath et al 2014).

Taking part in informal social activities represents one possible approach to prevent burnout and psychological distress (Sánchez-Moreno et al 2014).
Social workers who had experienced an increase in budget constraints or efficiency demands reported experiences of impaired work-related well-being more often than their colleagues (Mänttäri-van der Kuip 2014).

It is the combination of high demand and low control that may be most problematic ... This study found that being part of the IB pilots was associated with a doubling of the likelihood of being at risk of high strain, which suggests that the new processes added to existing burdens of work and reduced discretion (Wilberforce et al 2014).

Job autonomy seems to contribute to [job satisfaction] in spite of high demands (Stalker et al 2007).
Of particular relevance to educators who may seek to enhance resilience in students is the growing evidence that it is not an innate, stable characteristic, but one that can be developed through carefully targeted interventions (Grant et al 2014).

[Two] studies used a Realistic Job Preview (RJP), which aims to ensure that applicants fully understand the challenges and expectations of the position prior to starting (Webb & Carpenter 2012).

Extending from setting boundaries, the themes of ‘do not rescue’, and ‘knowing limitations’ were all stated by participants as necessary in maintaining their own wellbeing (Wendt et al 2011).
STRATEGIES VARY – FOOD, EXERCISE OR BOTH?

NASW Survey

Community Care

Social workers more likely to turn to food than to managers as way of coping with stress

Nearly a third of the respondents to our exclusive survey have taken time off due to stress in the past year.

by Kirsty McGregor on December 2, 2013 in Caseloads, Stress, Workforce
What are some of the things that you find helpful in reducing stress?
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

• Absolutely not correct to take ‘can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen approach’
• Not just about the work – otherwise all social workers would feel stressed
• It is not inevitable – some interventions help
• Possible to experience high caseloads and high job satisfaction
  • About increasing autonomy and role conflict
AND FINALLY...

Before we finish.....
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DISCLAIMER

• The Social Care Workforce Research Unit receives funding from the Department of Health Policy Research Programme. The views expressed in this presentation are those of the authors and not those of the Department of Health.

• Stress and burnout was one of the topics covered in our literature review for the Professional Standards Authority.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slide no</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pile of journals <a href="http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/journal-citation-cartels-on-the-rise/2005009.article">http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/journal-citation-cartels-on-the-rise/2005009.article</a> and Wordle - thanks Jonathan Feinberg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>