


Chapter 7

Burnout in the Social Work Profession: Now, Then, and With Planning, Maybe Never Again

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ABSTRACT

A review of burnout in the social work profession is presented in the chapter. The focus is on social workers' experience of burnout in the pre-pandemic and COVID-19 pandemic eras. Human service professionals have a high probability of experiencing burnout. Burnout has been described as the cost of caring for human service professionals and often occurs when workers are exposed to stressful situations. Having compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, shared trauma, collective trauma and trauma trigger fatigue are all situations that can lead to social worker burnout. Social worker burnout can include feelings of exhaustion, depersonalization and professional inefficacy. The purpose of the chapter is to define social work burnout, explore assessments for burnout, review social work job circumstances associated with burnout and present research on prevention/intervention for social work burnout in the pre-pandemic and COVID-19 pandemic eras.

INTRODUCTION

From the pre-COVID-19 pandemic era to the pandemic era, social work professionals report experiencing burnout at an increased rate (Kranke, Kranke & Der-Martirosian, 2024). In the pre-pandemic era social workers rates of burnout are

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recorded as 30-75% (Childs et al., 2024). However, during the pandemic era social workers burnout rate in the United States and United Kingdom is as high as 80 - 90% (Evans et al., 2021; McFadden et al., 2015). The finding of higher reported rates of burnout during the pandemic is not surprising. Individuals endured isolation, fear of contagion, and loss during the pandemic (Asakura et al., 2023). The pandemic has made life more stressful for everyone and social workers are no exception. Indeed, social workers have been exposed to the COVID-19 stress both in their personal lives and in their professional work (Holmes, 2021). The dual stress exposure social workers experience complicates their strain (Kranke et al., 2022).

Cherniss (1980) suggests burnout is a transactional process that occurs over time due to workers encountering intolerable workplace stress that is not alleviated. The stress which is not ameliorated leads to tension, fatigue and exhaustion in the worker, who in response to the strain may emotionally detach from work. According to Cherniss, the nature of human service work creates a workplace environment ripe for burnout. Social workers' passion for helping conflicts with the limited resources and bureaucracy found in the field. Essentially, social work professionals are attracted to their career based on a desire to serve. However, once in the profession, social workers find bureaucratic constraints, heavy paperwork demands, limited professional autonomy, seemingly intractable social problems and client recidivism and defensiveness (Leiter, 1991). The mismatch between the passion for social work and the day-to-day job duties lead to burnout (Kranke et al., 2024).

Additionally, Zerden (2024) explains that the expectation for social workers is to be "everything, everywhere, all at once". The social work job role is inclusive of case manager, resource specialist, advocate, therapist, community organizer and more (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2018). In other words, be everything. The social work tasks are performed in many settings, e.g., schools, hospitals, counseling centers, nonprofit organizations, governmental agencies, communities and more (Berg-Weger, 2019). Therefore, social workers must be everywhere. Social workers perform duties with people throughout the lifespan and in all situations of crisis and need (Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2017). Consequently, social workers must perform disparate duties all at once.

The U.S. News listed two social work jobs in the top five of the most stressful jobs in the United States (Adam, 2024). Clinical social worker was the third most stressful job and Child and Family social worker was the fifth most stressful job. Stressful jobs can beget burnout. We know that social workers experience burnout during the pre-COVID-19 pandemic era through to the post pandemic era (Kranke & Der-Martirosian, 2024). Discussion in the chapter will explore the social work experience with burnout in the pre-pandemic and COVID-19 pandemic eras, the definition of burnout, the assessment of burnout, the circumstances associated with

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