Building emotional resilience in social workers

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While building resilience in clients is a key component of the work carried out by social workers, it should also extend to social workers themselves. In this article, Social Work Team Leader Evelyn Chafota looks at how this can be achieved in a busy and challenging environment.

Although social work can be a very rewarding profession, the role is associated with high levels of stress, which can have a detrimental effect on wellbeing. This was highlighted in a survey of more than 1,200 social work staff, in which stress was found to be the biggest cause of work-related absenteeism.¹

When confronted with a multitude of challenges, including organisational policy and practice changes, limitations of resources and problems related to the recruitment and retention of staff, some social workers seem impervious to these tribulations and continue to thrive in their careers. In contrast, these same challenges appear overly burdensome to others, meaning they easily succumb to illness and burnout.

So is there some quintessential quality or personal attribute(s) possessed by some but not all social workers, which allows them to endure such adversities? In short, yes there is, and in this article, I want to discuss the features of a resilient social worker, possible barriers to achieving resilience and, most importantly, using examples from my own experience, how to develop resilient social workers.

What is emotional resilience?

Individuals working within a ‘helping profession’, such as healthcare or social work, find that their job is often emotionally demanding. Grant and Kinman² discuss how managing a situation of complexity and uncertainty, lack of control and support, and interactions with service users that evoke strong emotional reactions are particularly challenging.

The term ‘resilience’, in general usage, is perceived as the ability to be happy or successful again, i.e., to be able to ‘bounce back’, after something difficult or bad has happened. The word has its origins in the Latin, resilia³ which is the ‘action of rebounding’.

In essence, resilience represents a two-dimensional construct; on the one hand there is the experience of an adverse event or set of circumstances that is emotionally challenging, which is coupled with the facility of an individual to cope in the...
face of the adversity. Individuals with the tenacity to ‘bounce back’ in the face of emotionally demanding circumstances have emotional resilience. According to Luthar and Cicchetti, the construct of resilience can be defined in terms of a process rather than an individual personality trait. They explain how it might be incorrect to refer to someone as being ‘resilient’, and more pertinent to describe how the individual is able to display resilient adaptation. However, this perception is at variance with the views of social workers themselves, who have been found to frame emotional resilience in terms of a personality trait that facilitates an ability to cope with most life events.

With the most recent government statistics showing that the number of social workers leaving their job rose by nearly 16% in 2018 and that there are nearly 6,000 vacancies, is this a sign that many social workers lack resilience, and if so, what can be done about it?

Fortunately, there is a growing recognition of the importance of resilience, and the College of Social Work even acknowledges within the professional capabilities framework that social workers “demonstrate an initial understanding of the importance of personal self-care, resilience and adaptability in social work.” Nevertheless, the ways in which this might be achieved are not considered. Clearly, it is important for the wellbeing of those in emotionally demanding roles such as social work to become resilient, since this will enable them to more effectively deal with the stresses incurred through the job.

**Building resilience: a strengths-based approach**

As individuals we all have the ability to develop personal wisdom and the capacity to persevere and grow from experience. Our mindset – the way that we perceive something – can be either a barrier or enabler. Resilience involves behaviours, thoughts and actions, and is therefore something that can be learnt and developed.

For instance, our cognitive functions are critical with respect to how we cope with stressful situations, and recognition and modification of our response can help develop resilience. Parsons and colleagues, in their cognitive model of resilience, discuss how whether a particular event is deemed stressful to an individual, and how this can influence their cognitive appraisal of the event and the subsequent allocation of resources towards it. Thus, when an individual has an increased capacity to guide their thought processes to styles that are adaptive towards the specific situation encountered, they are more likely to develop resilience to a range of situations. In other words, resilience is related to an individual’s perception of an event and their subsequent reaction to it. This is not to say that a resilient individual does not experience stress or trauma, but rather that through experiential learning they are able to adapt their emotional response to a situation and are thus better equipped to deal with similar situations in the future.

**The role of the organisation**

Although emotional resilience can be developed, it is important to recognise that even the most resilient individuals have a tipping point. This is especially true when individuals are faced with intolerable working conditions or unreasonably large caseloads, meaning they are placed under enormous and constant pressure. Thus, organisations have a responsibility towards supporting and promoting resilience among their staff.

From a legal perspective, an organisation has a duty of care to their staff and a crucial role in helping to develop resilience among workers. The Health and Safety Executive have produced management standards to help identify stress in workers, which impacts on the individuals’ capacity to become emotionally resilient. These standards outline six key areas which, if not properly managed, can lead to stress.

These areas are:
- Demands (workload)
- Control (how much say a person has in how they do their job)
- Support (encouragement and the resources provided)
- Relationships (promoting positive working to avoid conflict and unacceptable behaviour)
- Role (whether an individual understands what is expected of them)
- Change (how any organisational change is managed and communicated).

Organisational factors which can positively impact upon resilience in social workers are described by Beddoe and include:
- Supervision
- Peer support
- Professional development opportunities
- Organisational culture
- Valuing of the profession.

**What are the characteristics of an emotionally resilient individual?**

The following diagram highlights some of the personal attributes of an emotionally resilient person.
Resilience in practice

Quality relationships

No single factor in isolation will facilitate the development of emotional resilience and the presence of several factors, acting in harmony are required. Our ability to cope when times are tough is directly related to the degree to which we feel connected to others and rely upon them for support. At the heart of emotional resilience is the fostering of quality relationships, and it is incumbent upon an organisation to make the building of relationships (i.e. quality relationships) a priority for everyone. It should also ensure this principle is carried forward to the partner agencies and families with which we work. Effective use of quality relationships means that workers will always benefit from organisations that support and promote such connections.

Reflective supervision

Building emotional resilience requires good quality reflective supervision, but this will only be successful if the supervisor has themselves received training in how to undertake this role. Reflective supervision provides the social worker with the time and space for self-reflection and critical dialogue, allowing them to critically analyse a particular situation, i.e., to “think things through”. By permitting a social worker to openly discuss a situation which they may have found difficult or distressing provides them with an opportunity to express any emotions that may have clouded their judgement at the time. The supervisor should remain objective and offer a balanced perspective, letting the social worker reflect on their actions and feelings towards the situation. Indeed, in a systematic review of factors influencing social worker retention, Webb and Carpenter\textsuperscript{12} identified how supervision is a factor in staff retention.

The importance of reflective supervision was further highlighted in the Protection of Children in England report by Lord Laming,\textsuperscript{13} who expressed concern that reflective supervision was at risk due to the overemphasis on process and targets. Laming noted how insufficient time was allocated to the provision of a supportive learning environment that could promote the continuous development of professional judgement and skills. In my experience, both one-to-one and group supervision can boost team morale, promote wellbeing and encourage the development of emotional resilience.

Facets of emotional resilience

Mindfulness

Taking steps to maintain good mental and physical health is a useful tool for navigating the challenges of social work. Mindfulness is one way in which social workers can unwind. It aids in helping workers to strengthen how they regulate emotions. In fact, research by Crowder\textsuperscript{14} explored the impact of mindfulness interventions in a group of social workers. The study revealed how those who had received the intervention perceived themselves as more resilient, reporting a decrease in stress, increased positive attitudes, perspectives and behaviours and even energy levels, relative to their workplace peers and supervisors.

Connected organisations

A connected organisation forges quality relationships throughout the whole system. Relationships are fostered at every level of an organisation, from the bottom to the top, and this contributes to the outcomes for clients. Organisations that nurture a supportive environmental culture allow the workers to grow and thrive, and this starts at the top with senior leaders setting this tone. Effective communication between leaders and staff is likely to produce a healthy workforce. A connected organisation is one where there is dissemination of the organisation’s vision; keeping staff abreast of policies and organisational changes, listening and actively responding to feedback from staff through surveys and undertaking collaborative briefings between staff and management. Within a connected organisation, there is much less risk of staff alienation, which lowers moral and ultimately emotional resilience.

Job control

Manageable caseloads are key in social work, and it is vital for local authorities to work harder to ensure that social workers are allocated cases that they can effectively manage. This is particularly important in difficult-to-reach areas of social work, such as child protection, where most local authorities are struggling to recruit and retain staff.

Key attributes of an emotionally resilient individual (Adapted from Grant and Kinman)\textsuperscript{11}
A range of measures can help improve social workers’ job control and thus foster resilience. Such measures will include flexible working conditions, for example compressed hours or a four-day week, both of which are a means of motivating workers and enhancing their commitment to the organisation. Another is providing additional holiday entitlement, and some authorities have offered staff an additional 10 days leave as a one-off incentive provided that they remain in the post for three years, and this is repeated after five years of service.

**Effective support networks**

Social work is a demanding job that exposes staff to many emotional challenges. Having admin support within the team can ease the workload burden and thus reduce the risk of stress. In turn this will help build resilience.

As part of their induction, new workers could be partnered up with a more experienced individual (i.e. a buddy), providing peer support and allowing them to quickly become familiarised with the systems and procedures of the organisation. This also offers the new worker the opportunity to offload and discuss any issues in a safe environment with their buddy.

Weekly staff briefings also enable social workers to plan their diaries with peers, allowing them to focus on more pending tasks. In addition, social workers benefit from regular service meetings where they can openly discuss positive and negative aspects of their job with senior management. In my experience, actively celebrating success is a quick win to enabling social workers to develop resilience. We have a shout out board where we can showcase our ‘achievements of the week’. This can range from something as simple as a worker completing a report within the required timescales, to attending court etc. This serves to inspire social workers and provides the feedback that they are indeed competent workers, despite the challenges they face in the current climate.

In summary, social work is a demanding profession which can create a heavy emotional toll on staff. Both the organisation and managers must take responsibility for the development of emotional resilience among their workforce to enable them to achieve the best possible outcomes for everyone who makes use of their service.

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