Compassion, wellbeing and distress in Social Workers:

the importance of caring for the self as well as for others

BASW Independents March 2018
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Aims

- Overview of stress and resilience in social workers

- Summary of a research study which focussed on 370 independent social workers and will report on the challenges of this work and the factors that contribute to resilience and psychological well-being.

- It will conclude with some recommendations for individuals and BASW Independents and an overview of how resilience to stress can be built and how compassion fatigue can be avoided.

Social work stress and resilience

- Emotionally challenging, but rewarding
  - High burnout, but high personal accomplishment

- High risk of stress, linked with:
  - Ill-health; absenteeism
  - Compassion fatigue; emotional exhaustion; vicarious trauma
  - Impaired service provision
  - Attrition: average working "life" is 8 years

- Increasing stress and work-life conflict
  - The main reason for wishing to leave

Stress in social work

Occupational factors
- Exposure to threats and violence
- Uncertainty of working with involuntary clients
- Emotionally demanding work
- Dealing with trauma
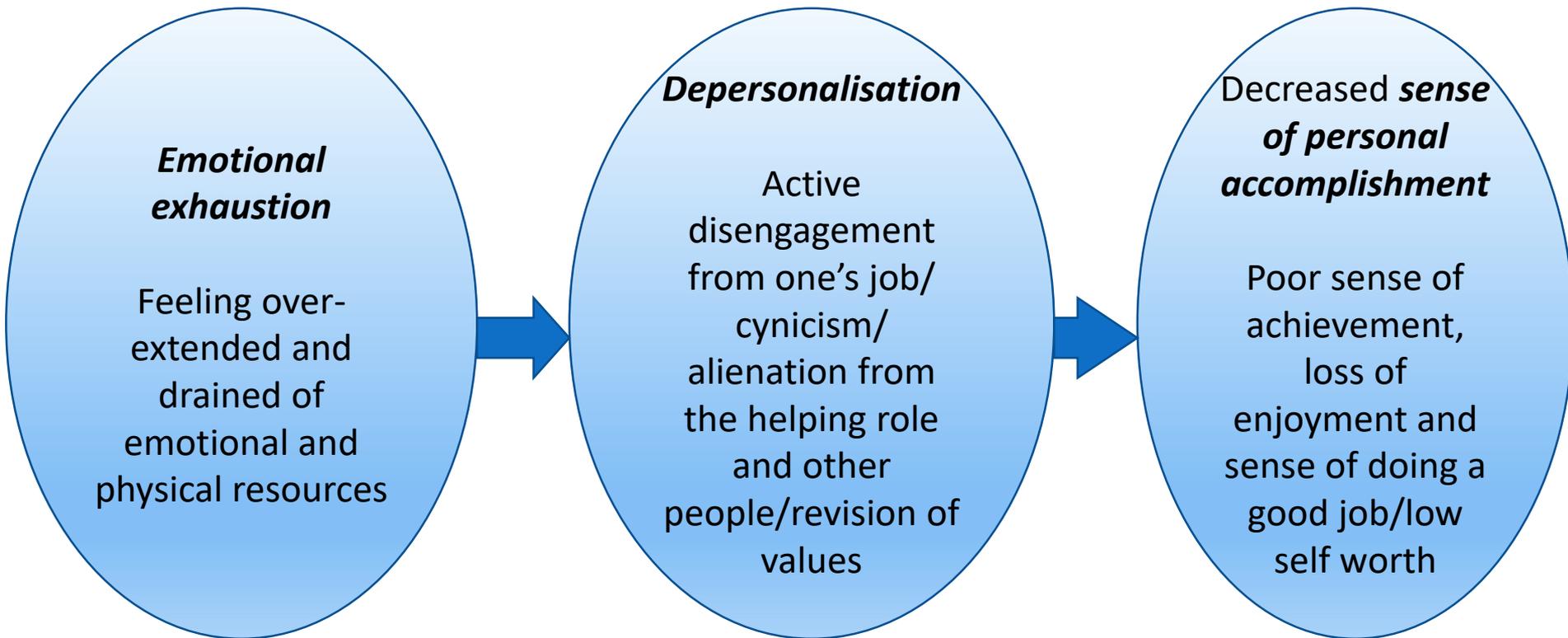- An environment of public scrutiny and mistrust

Organisational factors
- Heavy caseloads
- Limited resources and lack of support
- Unsupportive organisational culture
- Dealing with bureaucracy
- Changing social policies

Organisational stressors
are generally considered
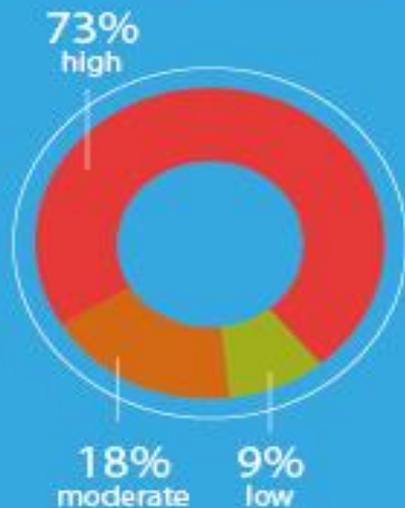more stressful – is this the case
for social workers?

Adamson et al., 2012; Biron et al. 2014; Ellet et al., 2007; Grant & Kinman, 2014

Burnout – running on empty

Emotional exhaustion

Feeling over-extended and drained of emotional and physical resources

Depersonalisation

Active disengagement from one's job/ cynicism/ alienation from the helping role and other people/revision of values

Decreased **sense of personal accomplishment**

Poor sense of achievement, loss of enjoyment and sense of doing a good job/low self worth

Maslach & Jackson, 1981

Burnout and social workers: a dual-process

Burnout and social workers

Emotional Exhaustion — 73% high, 18% moderate, 9% low

Depersonalisation — 26% high, 35% moderate, 39% low

Personal Accomplishment — 91% high, 9% moderate, 0% low

Community Care, 2015
(n = 1359)
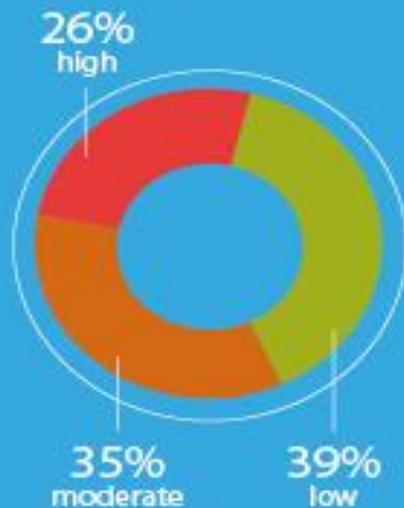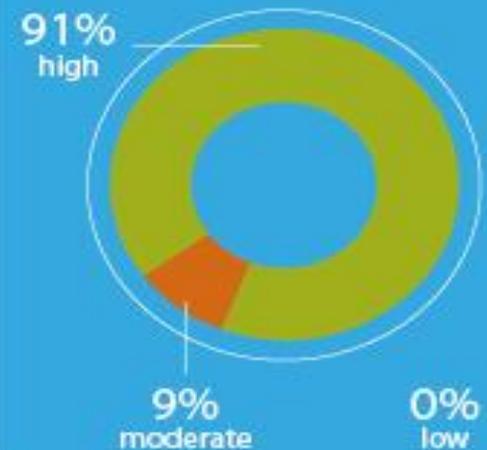
Independent Social Workers

- Little or no research on the stress experienced by independent social workers or the factors that might increase or reduce the risk.

- BASW research has presented a mixed picture

"As an independent, less time to spend on the project I am employed to undertake. An expensive use of my time on menial tasks"

"Going independent has meant I am better off financially and emotionally."

"As an independent, more has been expected of me because of the effect of cuts."

"Fewer opportunities for independents, and lower pay rates offered."

BASW Research Voices from the Frontline: Real Comments from Real Social Workers (BASW, 2012)

The importance of self-care and resilience

- "*Put on your own oxygen mask, before attempting to help others.*"

- Self-care is not 'selfish'

- Self compassion underpins resilience and wellbeing

- It is vital for long-term wellbeing and professional effectiveness – and a long, healthy and satisfying career

Put Your Oxygen Mask On First.

Kinman & Grant, 2016

What is resilience and why is it important?

"Resilience: the capacity for flexible and resourceful adaptation to external and internal stressors" (Klohen, 1996)

- Bouncing back; thriving; successful coping

- Hardiness; psychological capital; sense of coherence

- Linked with health, longevity and satisfaction

Some Features of Resilient Social Workers

Reflective ability

Social support

Compassion Satisfaction

Job control

Coping flexibility

Resilience and Wellbeing

✔

Kinman and Grant (2011)

Study of Independent Social Workers

- **Aims**
  - To identify the emotional demands and wellbeing experienced by independent social workers
  - To explore the factors that might protect or increase the risk of poor wellbeing
  - To recommend areas for targeted support

- **The Research**
  - Survey of Independent Social workers using recognised and reliable measures including the GHQ.
  - A year apart with added variables to ascertain if there were predictors of qualities associated with resilience

Sample profile

	2016	2017
Demographics		
- Female participants	79%	78%
- Over 45	70%	69%
- Over 55	39%	41%
Employment		
- Main Employment	70%	71%
- Full time	33%	28%
- Part time	45%	42%
- Agency/Contract	23%	30%
Experience		
# Qualified > 10 Years	66%	75%
# Independent (1-5 years)	77%	73%
# working with children	48%	46%

Main Measures

Mental Health	GHQ measures sub clinical levels of depression and anxiety as well as sleeping difficulties and cognitive disturbance
Burnout	A state of chronic stress that leads to: physical and emotional exhaustion. cynicism and detachment, feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment
Compassion Satisfaction	Positive feelings derived from helping others
Compassion Fatigue	Also known as secondary traumatic stress (STS), is a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of compassion over time.
Self-Compassion	Comprises self-kindness, mindfulness and a sense of common humanity
Job Control	Ability to influence what happens in their work environment.

Main Findings: Wellbeing

- The score of the sample as a whole was generally better than studies of other occupational groups and community samples

- Levels of compassion satisfaction and self compassion were fairly high and compassion fatigue low

Main Findings: Emotional demands

- SWs who found their work more emotionally demanding were at greater risk of burnout worse mental health and a much poorer work-life balance

- They also tended to experience less compassion satisfaction and self compassion and more compassion fatigue.

- Those who indicated that their work was more emotionally demanding tended to be perfectionist

Main findings: Risk factors

- **Work life conflict:** Risk factor for mental health, burnout. A good work life balance is protective.

- **Perfectionism:** Risk factor for mental health, burnout and poor work life balance

- **Lack of self compassion (low self-kindness & mindfulness and social isolation):** risk factors for poor mental health and burnout

- Those newer to independent work were at more risk of burnout and compassion fatigue.

Main findings: Protective factors

- **Job Control: This** was high and was linked to better mental health, less burnout and more compassion satisfaction. Social workers with job control still found the work demanding but the scope for control protected their well being.

- **Self compassion:** Self compassion was an important resource, as it protects mental health, burnout etc.

- **Support:** Social Workers with more support had much better mental health, had better work life balance and were less likely to experience burnout. They also experienced less compassion fatigue and were more self compassionate.

Support: A mixed picture

- The majority (85%) could get advice on work problems but 15% rarely can

- Most (74%) can get emotional support from colleagues either often or sometimes, but nearly one in three (26%) can do so rarely or never

- Around one-third (28%) are able to get together face to face with colleagues for work purposes only rarely or never, but a third (33%) can do so often.

- More than half of the sample (58%) feel isolated from the wider social work community

- The majority of the sample (75%) get support about work issues from family and friends

How can we build resilience? ✓

Reflective ability	Reflective supervision Mindfulness
Social Support	**Peer support/coaching**
Compassion Satisfaction	Mindfulness Emotional disclosure/writing
Job Control	Stress management/appraisal Time management Goal Setting
Emotional literacy	Mindfulness Reflective supervision

Ways to build support : Peer Coaching

- Two peers of equal status meet on a regular basis
  - listening not telling

- Encourages a solution-focused approach
  - not dwelling excessively on problems

- Helps identify where you are and where you want to be

- Enables you to set realistic, achievable goals
  - Self generated not set by coach

- Helps you identify obstacles and resources (personal and external) so you can reach them

Baker & Jones, 2014

Peer Coaching Research with Independents

- Small study: Trained a group of Independents to be peer coaches and undertake peer coaching sessions with colleagues by telephone.

- Early indicators suggest this was a positive experience.

"The coachee found better ways to manage her workload and learnt how to obtain and respond to feedback in a more positive and constructive way."

"We both benefitted from the sessions. I believe she (the coachee) is looking forward to the challenge of making lasting changes in different areas of her life."

I am particularly pleased with the changes I have made to the balance of the work I do/organizing it to allow more time for writing up and also locating a suitable supervisor.

Ways to reduce stress and enhance resilience – 3 top tips

1. Build a community of support

- Resilient people have strong social networks

- Consider building a strong support network

- Consider building a peer support network to counter unrealistic expectations of self

2. Keep a healthy work life balance and sense of job control

- Set boundaries between work and personal life

- Identify buffer zones between activities

- Learn to say no to unrealistic expectations and unattainable goals particularly if you have a tendency towards perfectionism

# Ways to reduce stress and enhance resilience – 3 top tips

3. Practice self kindness and compassion

- Without looking after yourself, you cannot be effective over the longer-term

- Build in time to relax and be mindful, try practising mindfulness

- Self compassion is important-give yourself a break

- Practice forgiveness, stop punishing yourself for your mistakes

- Employ a growth mind-set, setbacks are a chance for learning

Recommendations

✓ Developing greater support for independents to manage their isolation and the demands of the work, particularly for those newer to working as an independent.

✓ Workshops to introduce social workers to evidence based strategies

✓ Consider the development of a portal to share best practice in building resilience and improving wellbeing and self compassion

✓ Consider widening the implementation of peer coaching scheme or mentorship between newer and more established independents
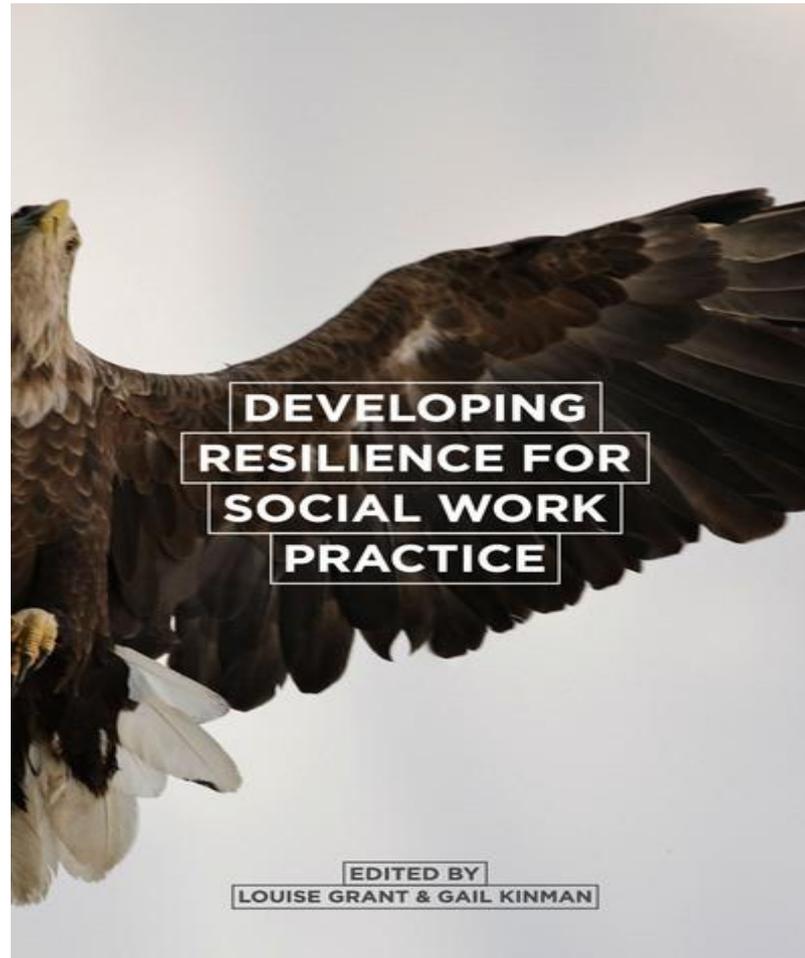
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Questions