

Welcome to Stockton University

Online Seminar in Field Instruction
(SIFI)

UNIT 7: Stress and Self Care

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The Helping Profession

It is important that practitioners and educators understand the risk factors and symptoms associated with the phenomena of compassion fatigue and secondary trauma in order to identify, prevent, and/or minimize their effects. Information on these conditions are part of the social work curricula as a first-line preventive measure for the training of inexperienced social workers who may be vulnerable to the effects of these conditions (Lerias & Byrne, 2003). Information on these topics should also be included as part of agency training. Risk factors and symptoms associated with these conditions should be discussed.

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Definition

Compassion Fatigue

The profound emotional and physical exhaustion that helping professionals and care givers can develop over the course of their career as helpers. It is a gradual erosion of all the things that keep us connected to others in our caregiver role: our empathy, our hope, and our compassion.

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Definition

Secondary Trauma

Secondary trauma is commonly referred to as "the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person." Dr. Laurie Pearlman, an expert in the trauma field prefers the term vicarious trauma to describe the "cumulative transformative effect of working with survivors of traumatic life events." (www.secondarytrauma.org)

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Effects On The Agency

- “Secondary trauma is a contributing factor to turnover. Turnover brings down staff morale, increases the workload for remaining staff, results in poor continuity of care for children and families, and prevents organizations from forming a high functioning and cohesive workforce. In addition, the quality and quantity of a staff member’s work may suffer if they have been secondarily traumatized and do not receive assistance.” (www.secondarytrauma.org)

Common Symptoms of Secondary Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

- Mental and emotional exhaustion
- Change in sleep patterns
- Increased use of alcohol or drug use
- Frequently calling out sick from work
- Anger or irritability
- Forgetfulness
- Lack of empathy or ability to feel sympathy
- Detachment
- Exaggerated sense of responsivity
- Avoidance of clients
- Difficulty making decisions
- Depression
- Cynicism
- Distancing
- Resentment
- Hypervigilance
- Intrusive imagery

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Burnout

Compassion fatigue can lead to burnout.

- Burnout can be described as a multifaceted syndrome composed of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal achievement caused by a long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations (Cox, 2013).
- A person experiencing burnout has low job satisfaction, feels powerless, overwhelmed, depleted and frustrated by their work environment.

Prevention

- Caregivers need to be able to deliver service excellence without compromising their well-being. It is important for them and for their employers to recognize early warning signs of burnout and compassion fatigue.
- The organization and its policies play a key role by creating conditions that not only reduce the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue, but also promote healthy, more effective workers.

Compassionate Detachment

The art of social work is being able to be compassionate while being detached enough to not internalize or take on the client's problems or pain. Social workers who are able to do this feel deeply for another's pain without owning it or being consumed by it. This is a difficult skill to teach in the classroom and it is essential that it is taught in the field placement. It is a skill that is best learned experientially. Skills for compassion detachment are self-awareness, self-monitoring and a perception of how the work is mentally and physically affecting oneself.

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Respecting Self

- *“Compassionate detachment is respecting our client’s power enough to not rescue them while extending loving compassion to them in the present moment. Simultaneously compassionate detachment is also respecting ourselves enough to not take the client’s challenges on as our own and realizing that to do so serves good purpose for no one.” (Michael Arloski)*
- Michael Arloski, Real Balance Global Wellness Services: <https://www.realbalance.com/about-dr-arloski>

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Self-Care

- Caring for ourselves is not an act of selfishness. To the contrary, it is one of the ways we treat ourselves as humans and acknowledge our duties as professionals in protecting ourselves, our peers and the profession as a whole (Steinter & Cox, 2013).

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Self Care

- Self care refers to selected actions that restore balance in your personal and professional lives.
- Self care is not only an add on activity but a state of mind through development of self awareness, self regulation and self efficacy.

University of Buffalo School of Social Work: <http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit.html>

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Self Care and Burnout Prevention

- Exercise- 3x per week increases productivity and happiness
- Read- boosts creativity and activates sensory areas in the brain
- Laugh- strengthens the immune, system boosts energy
- Eat well- improves learning and memory, helps mental disorders, and improves energy level.
- Meditate- decreases stress and anxiety, increases coping mechanisms.
- Greenspace- assists with healthy cortisol levels
- Time off- leads to better quality sleep, decreases stress and improves mood
- Sleep- restores cognitive function, helps with mood.

Self-Awareness

- This essential trait in social work is most often thought of in relation to being aware of ourselves, who we are and what we are doing in our interactions with clients. One piece of self-awareness is the need to monitor one's own sense of distress, exhaustion, frustration and vicarious traumatization (Barnett, 2007). It is very easy and common for social workers to just keep going and plow ahead without spending much time thinking about how the work is affecting them. Barnett (2007) calls this the professional blind spot –oneself.

Tools for students

The process recording is a very valuable tool for raising the student's self awareness, and providing a forum for the student's response to the clients and the nature of the work. The field instructor should encourage the student to do process recordings on the cases and situations that are MOST difficult for the student to contend with. The purpose of the process recording is for students to examine themselves and their practice skills.

Journal writing can assist the student with keeping track of the work they are doing as well as processing how they are feeling. They also can write down questions to ask the supervisor later in the day or during supervision.

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Balancing

The ongoing task of balancing work and family responsibilities is harder when your work is emotionally demanding. This will be new to students who may be mature but come to social work from other professions. This is another one of those tasks (like boundary setting) in which the field instructor becomes a model. Now is the time to reflect on your own self-care strategies. It is helpful to be attuned to what sustains you and allows you to continue in this type of emotionally demanding profession. Self-care and self-awareness are the keys to prevention and recovery from work related forms of emotional stress. Most social workers have a hardiness and a resilience that allows them to stay healthy and do good work.

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Implications for supervisors

Supervisors or field instructors find themselves providing support for supervisees in the form of debriefing on cases. They are not necessarily suggesting anything or changing an outcome but simply listening. This part of supervision is supremely valuable in helping workers and students persevere in difficult or unsavory situations. Good listening skills help the worker or student feel supported.

References

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