



## Factors that affect social workers' job satisfaction, stress and burnout

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### **Abstract:**

There has been a growing focus in academic research on the strain and exhaustion that are experienced by those who work in the medical field. Because of considerable developments in administration, society, and politics, the duties and responsibilities that employees are expected to fulfill have undergone significant transformations in recent years. The idea that predominates among academics is that social work is an extremely difficult line of work. This line of work is characterized by tensions between advocating for clients and meeting the needs of the agency, which acts as a primary source of stress for social workers. The investigation of previous work in the field of social work for the present study was directed by two key questions: Is it true that social workers are subjected to a greater amount of stress than other medical professionals? What factors contribute to social workers experiencing high levels of stress and weariness, and how may these factors be mitigated? The vast majority of the available research primarily relied on anecdotal evidence or compared the levels of stress experienced by social workers to the levels of stress experienced by the general population. This was done rather than doing an analysis comparing the levels of stress experienced by social workers and professionals in sectors that are comparable. It has been noted, on the basis of existing empirical data, that social workers have a higher susceptibility to stress and exhaustion when compared to their counterparts in other professional fields. This is because social workers deal with a greater variety of people and situations. The investigation of various variables, including the organizational framework of the work environment and the inherent tension that exists between job requirements and philosophical beliefs, has allowed for the establishment of a correlation between stress and fatigue within the social work profession. This association has been shown to be causal. It was discovered that there is evidence to support the preventative effects of cooperation and monitoring.

**Keywords:** Social work, job satisfaction, stress, burnout, factors, workplace environment, workload, support systems, coping mechanisms.



## **Introduction**

Previous studies (Acker, 1999; Egan, 1993; Gilbar, 1998; Sze & Ivker, 1986; Um & Harrison, 1998) have shown that social workers are more likely to experience feelings of weariness and stress than the general population. Social workers are frequently involved in difficult social situations and direct the majority of their attention toward the people they serve (clients). According to Cournoyer (1988), Pines and Kafry (1978), and Soderfeldt et al. (1995), there are a variety of variables that can be related to the disagreements that may emerge in the employment of human service workers. In addition, because of the numerous administrative, cultural, and political shifts that took place over the course of the preceding decade, the very nature of social work and the approaches that it takes have been subjected to significant shifts (Jones & Novak, 1993; Kurland & Salmon, 1992). It has been pointed out by a number of authors (Collings and Murray, 1996; Gibson et al., 1989; Soderfeldt et al., 1995; Taylor-Brown et al., 1981; Thompson et al., 1996) that there are not enough findings from systematic studies on the topic of stress and exhaustion among social workers.

According to Cournoyer (1988), experts in the field of human services usually fail to recognize the magnitude of the challenges faced by social workers. A comprehensive review of the relevant literature finds that there is a paucity of systematic studies on burnout among social workers (Soderfeldt et al., 1995). This is in stark contrast to the existing body of knowledge on burnout in other areas of human service.

The purpose of this article is to study the underlying variables that contribute to stress and its subsequent repercussions, with a particular emphasis on burnout among social workers.

## **Stress and burnout: a definition and example**

According to Maslach et al. (1996) and Zastrow (1984), the term "stress" refers to the mental and physiological responses that individuals feel as a result of being exposed to various stressors. A demand, situation, or event is considered to be a stressor if it causes a disruption in the individual's state of homeostasis, activates the stress



response, and leads to increased autonomic arousal. A stressor can come in the form of a demand, situation, or occurrence. (Caughey, 1996; Taylor-Brown et al., 1982; Zartow, 1984) There is data that points to a correlation between prolonged tension and the development of chronic anxiety, psychosomatic disorders, and a number of other mental health conditions. Burnout is a serious danger in situations involving prolonged stress due to the fact that it has the ability to reduce the productivity of professionals working in the field of human services (Collings & Murray, 1996). According to Maslach et al. (1996), burnout is a syndrome that can be identified by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished feelings of personal accomplishment. These symptoms are present in those who have experienced the syndrome. One of the most notable aspects of the burnout phenomena is an increase in the intensity of feelings of emotional exhaustion, which manifests itself in individuals as a lower capacity to offer psychological resources. The secondary part of depersonalization refers to the phenomenon in which workers react to prolonged stress by developing a pessimistic and cynical attitude in the direction of their customers. According to the findings of Maslach et al. (1996), the third dimension relates to diminished personal accomplishment. This dimension indicates that an employee has a negative perception of their work and is dissatisfied with their achievements.

### **Does social work philosophy and values make it inherently stressful?**

Social workers, according to authors like Pines and Kafry (1978), are at risk for burnout because they have a common emotional bond—a heightened sensitivity to the problems of their clients. In his 1987 study, Rushton investigated if depressed people were more likely to choose social work as a career than other options. One could reasonably assume that they were driven by a desire to see others succeed in the face of adversity. Several theories suggest that the desire to help others is at the heart of the decision to become a social worker. While it's admirable to care about your



patients, doing so too much might be exhausting and stressful (Acker, 1999; Borland, 1981; Egan, 1993).

Developing and maintaining connections with those in need is the bedrock of social work. Social workers may face internal conflict when dealing with clients who make outrageously illegal or unreasonable demands or expectations. In social work education, the importance of building rapport with clients is emphasized heavily (Rushton, 1987). Rushton (1987) suggests that social workers may have difficulty understanding how their clients' beliefs and values shape the responses they provide. This problem emerges because their education and experience have taught them that they must always approach their customers with an attitude of nonjudgment. Therefore, people can either show resiliency and take responsibility for their actions, or they might place the blame for a negative result on something or someone else.

It is widely held that social workers experience high levels of stress due to factors like their position, the demands of their roles, and the complexity of the environments in which they work (Dillon, 1990; Gilbar, 1998; Rushton, 1987). There has been a shift away from valuing patients as people and toward focusing on quantitative measures of success like hospital throughput. The aforementioned scenario may present a challenge for social workers as they attempt to forge mutually beneficial relationships in accordance with social work theory and practice (Borland, 1981). According to Kurland and Salmon (1992), social workers are under constant pressure since the issues they deal with are reflective of shifting cultural norms and rising levels of stress. A number of studies (Balloch et al., 1998; Borland, 1981; Dillon, 1990; Jones & Novack, 1993; Rushton, 1987) have been undertaken on this subject. Reid et al. (1999) found that social workers had a lot of trouble carrying out evaluations in accordance with the Mental Health Act. It can be difficult for social workers to juggle their roles as protectors of patients' rights and advocates for those patients' interests when they have so many people's well-beings to consider.



According to research (McLean & Andrew, 2000; Borland, 1981), stress levels rise when there is a misalignment of ideals between social workers and administrators. In healthcare settings, when implementing social work principles may not directly increase profits, this trend stands out very clearly. There is a well-documented deficiency of decision-making authority in healthcare's discharge planning (Borland, 1981; Kadushin & Kulys, 1995). Many administrative constraints necessitate discharging patients from hospitals before they are psychologically and emotionally prepared to do so. The social worker's sphere of influence is constrained by the medical system's hierarchical structure, which is dominated by physicians. As problem-solvers, social workers are frequently faced with making tough decisions between equally undesirable alternatives (Rushton, 1987).

#### **Status and autonomy as sources of social work stress**

Dillon (1990) asserts that social workers often encounter limited agency in determining their client caseload, the duration and nature of their encounters with clients, the specific professional duties assigned to them, and the perceived significance of their job by others. Dillon (1990) posits that there exists a perception among certain individuals that social work entails acts of benevolence or the application of practical wisdom. Rushton (1987) posits that there exists a potential for misconceptions surrounding the roles and obligations of social work, as well as the optimal approaches to showcase its efficacy.

Several scholars have noted that social workers encounter stress due to the perceptions of other individuals, including their colleagues and the wider public (Collings & Murray, 1996; Gibson et al., 1989; Jones et al., 1991; Smith & Nursten, 1998). The difficulties surrounding the identity and legitimacy of social work have been raised by Jones and Novak (1993).

In a qualitative study conducted by Reid et al. (1999), it was found that mental health social workers expressed dissatisfaction over the misconception of their role and the lack of recognition for their diverse skill set by other professionals in the field of



health services. In a similar vein, the study conducted by Kazushin and Kulys (1995) revealed that social workers encountered conflicting expectations pertaining to their duties, while their colleagues on the team shown a lack of awareness regarding the importance of the social work role.

According to the study conducted by McLean and Andrew (2000), the primary factors contributing to stress were identified as role conflict, disagreement over optimal approaches, and a dearth of acknowledgement.

Um and Harrison (1998) found that social workers who encounter role conflict tend to exhibit elevated levels of weariness and job dissatisfaction.

#### **Protective factors: Supervision and team support**

A large body of social work literature has focused on exploring how social and emotional support might mitigate the detrimental effects of workplace stress. Several researchers have studied this phenomenon; among of the most notable are Coady et al. (1990), Himle et al. (1986, 1989), Koeske and Koeske (1989), and Um and Harrison (1998). Maslach et al.'s (1996) research shows that having friends and family to lean on is a great buffer against burnout in the workplace. Um and Harrison (1998) found that social support moderates and mediates the association between job dissatisfaction and burnout.

Many social workers consult their superiors for advice in order to feel more confident in their work and acquire new skills (Collings & Murray, 1996; Mizrahi & Abramson, 1985; Rushton, 1987). Himle et al.'s (1989) research attempted to discover how much of an effect social support has on reducing work-related stress.

Significantly lower rates of burnout, professional stress, and mental health problems were observed among study participants who reported receiving emotional support from coworkers and supervisors. According to Fahs Beck (1981), a major contributor to burnout was a lack of executive support in the workplace.

Coady et al. (1990) found no correlation between social workers' reports of team support and their ratings of emotional exhaustion or depersonalization on separate



measures. Individual accomplishment scores were higher among social workers who reported feeling supported by their team, indicating that they were less likely to become exhausted in the course of their work. Coady et al. (1990) studied social workers to determine if there was a connection between the degree to which they felt their supervisors supported them and their levels of emotional exhaustion and sense of personal achievement. There was no statistically significant correlation between social workers' ratings of supervisory support and their responses on these scales. The large difference in depersonalization subscale scores, however, should be highlighted. According to the research, social workers who view their manager as helpful are less likely to feel burned out on the job. In light of these considerations, Collings and Murray (1996) performed research that linked the idea that the primary purpose of monitoring is to protect supervisors to increased levels of stress.

Workload was found to have no direct effect on weariness, as determined by the research of Koeske and Koeske (1989). When the mediating role of support was considered, however, it was revealed that workload played a significant role. Researchers discovered that high workloads, especially in the absence of adequate social support, exacerbate the burnout issue. The number of clients seen in a typical day, the average time of direct client interaction per day, and the proportion of crisis interventions done were the characteristics that showed the largest link with burnout in the context of inadequate support.

### **Discussion**

Experts are in agreement that stress is a significant problem that has to be addressed, and they agree that its causes may be traced back to circumstances such as ambiguity in employment expectations, unmet high standards, and excessive workloads. It is clear that social workers experience exhaustion as a result of stress, as shown by the personal accomplishment component of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (262). This is the case despite the limited availability of reliable empirical evidence. Chris



Lloyd and the other persons in the group make up the remainder of the team's members. There is a possibility of inconsistency between the principles that social workers ascribe to and the way in which they actually behave.

In the field of social work, two of the many significant sources of stress are fundamental to the practice of the profession and are an inherent part of it.

This phenomenon is affected by both the idealistic and reformist stance of the profession, as well as the profession's appeal to persons who are vulnerable and lacking stability in their lives. The other types of stress can be related to environmental factors, such as the assignment of roles and the organizational structure of the institution.

There are a great number of first-hand testimonials and beliefs that have been presented that show the place has a tendency to attract people who are emotionally unstable or weak. The literature contains these beliefs. The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) has been utilized in a number of studies (Balloch et al., 1998; Caughey, 1996; Collins & Parry-Jones, 2000; Gibson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1996) as a method for determining significant levels of psychiatric morbidity. In comparison to the general population, previous studies have found that social workers have significantly lower levels of mental well-being (Bradley & Sutherland, 1995) and significantly higher levels of general anxiety and depression (Bennett et al., 1993). It is difficult to determine the causal relationship between the reported tension experienced by social workers and their subsequent acute emotional distress because it is unclear whether the tension directly led to the distress or if the distress simply coincided with the manifestation of their mental symptomatology. Determining this relationship is difficult because it remains uncertain whether the tension directly led to the distress or if the distress simply coincided with the manifestation of their mental symptomatology.

The basic goal of social work is to address the material and psychological requirements of clients in order to make it easier for such clients to participate in a





variety of societal activities. According to research conducted by Jones and Novak (1993), a sizeable number of social workers place the blame for their clients' challenges on the socioeconomic and political environments in which they live. When attempting to navigate this operational framework, social workers have come up against an increased number of obstacles as a result of considerable shifts in both the norms of society and the provision of services. As a result, there is a disparity between the fundamental principles of social work and the manner in which one is expected to carry out their professional responsibilities.

The phenomena of burnout among social workers has been found to be connected with a number of organizational aspects. These factors include job autonomy, role autonomy, role ambiguity, and role conflict. According to the findings of the study, it has been noted that social workers regularly experience substantial levels of role ambiguity and role conflict. These conclusions are based on observations made by the participants in the study.

It would appear that social workers face difficulties in using the knowledge and skills they possess in actual practice. The primary cause of these difficulties is the alteration of organizational structures, which has led to the imposition of contradictory role expectations by various outside parties. The ethical behavior of the individuals in question has come under examination, and they are encountering roadblocks in their efforts to satisfy the requirements of their customers while staying within the limitations established by the applicable laws and regulations.

The area of social work has experienced tremendous improvement in order to better serve those who have less options and less access to resources. This change was made to accommodate these people. As a result, it should not come as a surprise to find that respondents' emotions of accomplishment were rated lower on a measure that was established expressly for that purpose.

According to the research that has been done so far, mental health social workers appear to have lower levels of exhaustion compared to their colleagues who work in



hospitals and the welfare sector. Nevertheless, it is essential to point out that this general assumption is only supported by a limited amount of empirical evidence. In point of fact, one study suggests that social workers who specialize in family treatments had a lower degree of emotional detachment towards their clients as compared to those whose primary concentration is on issues related to mental health. It is possible for social workers to face obstacles that are characterized by power differentials and requests from the medical community that are incongruent with their fundamental ideals. This is because of the ubiquitous impact of the medical paradigm inside healthcare contexts. In response to the excessive demands made on social services, social workers have voiced their concerns about the lack of resources available to fully meet the requirements of clients who have a variety of social difficulties. Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance to recognize that there is a vast array of social work jobs, each of which is distinguished by its own particular sources of stress.

**Summary:**

The profession of social work is said to be characterized by a substantial vulnerability to stress and weariness, as proven by empirical investigations; this is said to be the case according to descriptive narratives.

According to the findings of several empirical studies, it has been found that the professional tasks of social workers can lead to feelings of stress and burnout. However, it is unclear to what extent these experiences are superior than those encountered in professional categories that are comparable to social work. Individuals in this category indicate a higher prevalence of burnout compared to the overall population, particularly in connection to perceiving lower personal success, even if there is some data that suggests the opposite. The wide variety of measurement methods that were used contributed to the complexity, which made it difficult to evaluate the consistency of the findings obtained from the many research. Researchers



have showed a significant interest in investigating a wide variety of elements that are connected with stress and burnout. It does not appear that there is a significant association between the demographic data that people use and their level of stress and burnout. The levels of stress and burnout among social workers were not shown to have a significant link with the prevalence of social worker-specific characteristics. Anxiety, stress, and burden at work, as well as the nature of the connection with one's boss, are significant contributors to these feelings. The investigations failed to place a considerable amount of emphasis on a variety of client-related facets. It was shown that potential risk factors that contribute to the development of weariness include the presence of insufficient work challenges, restricted work autonomy, unclear job positions, difficulty in servicing consumers, and lowered professional self-esteem. It was discovered that assistance from supervisors was the most important moderating element. It is vital that further research be conducted in order to investigate a more wide variety of factors that contribute to stress and to develop techniques for mitigating the effects of stress, such as increasing the number of supervisory options available and the amount of support provided by teams and managers. Consequently, subsequent research endeavors might result in developments in stress-reduction and stress-prevention measures, which would lead to an increase in the effectiveness of those strategies. Improving one's level of comprehension in this area has the potential to have a sizeable impact on both the level of satisfaction one has from their work and the level of success they achieve in their positions.



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