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University of Bedfordshire

Birkbeck UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

SWORD workbook:

Understanding resilience

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Introduction

Social work is a challenging and rewarding career, but all practitioners require organisational support to protect their wellbeing and develop their emotional resilience. Research findings show that, for the most part, social workers enjoy their work. Social workers in children's services have reported feeling valued by children and families, and supported by their managers and colleagues (Murray, 2015). Similarly, adult social workers experience their work as personally rewarding (McFadden et al., 2018), while those working in mental health settings generally report being satisfied with their role (Nelson et al., 2009). Nonetheless, the work can be emotionally demanding. Data from the annual Labour Force Survey (Health and Safety Executive, 2019, p. 5), suggests social workers are at greater risk of work-related stress, depression and anxiety than most professional groups. As listed below, the sector faces many challenges and each of these can threaten the wellbeing of social workers and the quality of service they provide:

- Rapidly changing social policies, complexity of multi-agency working, frequent reorganisations, and regular revision of policies and procedures.
- Public scrutiny and mistrust exacerbated by a 'blame' culture and negative perceptions of the profession promoted by the media and social media, whereby social workers are publicly criticised and sometimes even named.
- Heavier caseloads and rising intervention thresholds for child protection, with services offered only for more serious cases.
- An increased focus on risk assessment and risk management in mental health practice.
- The ongoing systemic challenges facing adult social care.
- Limited resources and reduced funding for services, so that social workers are increasingly expected to 'do more with less'.
- The introduction of centralised management models of practice and decision-making with increased administrative burdens.
- The widespread introduction of agile and flexible working and associated practices (e.g. hot-desking) with little guidance and support.
- High levels of absenteeism and 'presenteeism'[1] (i.e. where workers continue to work when sick).

1. Presenteeism is discussed in KFP5 Wellbeing.

Social workers who work with children and families are at high risk of burnout (McFadden, 2015), a condition involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation/cynicism and low personal accomplishment. A recent study of social workers employed in 22 local authorities in England (Hussein, 2018) found a high proportion of children's social workers were emotionally exhausted, felt jaded and cynical about their work, and lacked a sense of self-efficacy and achievement. More experienced social workers were less likely to show signs of burnout, but high turnover meant there were fewer in post (Hussein, 2018).

Research with social workers in mental health settings has found that they experience burnout when organisational factors impair their ability to deliver good care (Acker, 2010) and where they feel they have limited autonomy and poor managerial support (Hamama, 2012; Johnson et al., 2012). Lower self-perceived competence and increased in-role stress, including as a result of the changing ethos of mental health services (e.g. an emerging business ethos or target-based practice), are also correlated with burnout (Acker, 2010). Moves toward care management models, including the management of individualised budgets and their associated risks, have also added to the pressure adult social workers can feel in their role (Wilberforce et al., 2014). Other studies have found that many social workers are dissatisfied with their work-life balance, due to stress and emotional strain (Social Work Watch, 2014). There is evidence that some, particularly those working with children and families are seriously considering leaving the profession (Ravalier, 2018). The most common reasons given are the demanding nature of the job, a sense of lack of control and poor managerial support.

High turnover rates are extremely costly for organisations and have a negative impact on people who rely on services. In addition, there is some evidence that secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue can impair social work practice and have an adverse impact on the people with whom they work (Bride, 2007). In some circumstances this can lead workers to develop negative attitudes toward people using services (Hansson et al., 2013). It is therefore crucial to provide social workers with adequate support. Organisations have a key role to play in creating a workplace climate that builds the capacity for resilience so that the wellbeing of practitioners is protected. A healthy workplace climate can also help reduce practitioner turnover and enhance the delivery of social work services.

Defining resilience

There is no consensus on the definition and meaning of resilience. It has been conceptualised as a personal trait that helps people adapt positively to adversity, as an aspect of the external environment that enables people to thrive, and as a dynamic interplay between personal characteristics and the effective utilisation of supportive environmental features (see Grant & Kinman, 2014).

Building resilience: individual approaches

In their work with social workers (from different professional backgrounds), Grant and Kinman (2013) have found that resilience is most commonly seen as an individual capacity: the ability to resist, 'bounce back' or recover from difficulties or setbacks. More specifically, as the ability to use negative experiences to adapt to different contextual and developmental challenges. Social workers also refer to individuals' capacity to achieve personal growth during times of adversity, so that they emerge more resourceful than before.

Evidence suggests that a range of personal qualities and environmental resources are associated with individual resilience:

Self-awareness:

the capacity for introspection and a strong sense of personal identity.

Confidence and self-efficacy:

positive beliefs and attitudes about oneself and one's ability to exert control over motivation, behaviour and the social environment.

Emotional literacy:

the ability to attend to, recognise and regulate moods in oneself and others; an understanding of how emotional states can influence problem-solving and personal functioning.

Autonomy, purposefulness and persistence:

a sense of mastery and purpose; the capacity to identify priorities now and in the future; the ability to derive meaning and recover from difficulties.

Social support:

a strong network of supportive relationships that one can draw upon during challenging times;

Social competence:

advanced social skills and self-assurance in social situations.

Adaptability, resourcefulness and effective problem-solving skills:

the ability to respond to challenges positively and flexibly, and to generate ideas and solutions from different perspectives; successful adaptation to change and the ability to learn from experience.

Enthusiasm, optimism and hope:

having a positive but realistic outlook; generally expecting that positive change is possible.

Clearly, no one individual will be able to draw on all these resources, and those that are available will depend on the individual and the context in which they are working.

Table 1 sets out key resilience-building qualities and resources, along with examples of interventions and strategies that can enhance those resources at a personal level.

Key resilience-building qualities	Definition	Relevant interventions/strategies
Emotional literacy / emotional self-efficacy	Attending to, monitoring and regulating emotional reactions to practice; awareness of the impact of emotions on decision-making.	> Mindfulness > Reflective supervision > Emotional writing
Bounded empathy	Showing warmth, compassion and concern to service users; awareness of the need for emotional boundaries to avoid personal discomfort arising from their negative experiences.	> Reflective supervision > Mindfulness > Cognitive behavioural strategies > Emotional writing
Prioritising self-care and practising self-compassion	Being as understanding and tolerant of oneself as to others; acknowledging personal vulnerabilities as inevitable rather than a sign of weakness.	> Reflective supervision > Mindfulness > Peer support / coaching
Social resources	Building a community of support; self-confidence to interact with people from different backgrounds and value systems.	> Time management/personal organisation > Peer support/ coaching
Reflective ability	Reflecting on actions, decision-making and emotional reactions to practice; communicating self-reflections with others and adjusting working practices accordingly.	> Reflective supervision > Mindfulness
Coping flexibility	Possessing a variety of coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) and selecting those appropriate to the situational demands.	> Self knowledge / stress appraisal skills > Cognitive behavioural strategies > Emotional writing
Work-life balance	Setting clear boundaries between work and personal life to ensure opportunities to recover from work demands.	> Mindfulness > Time management / personal organisation > Peer support / coaching

Table 1: Key resilience-building qualities and strategies

2. More information on these approaches can be found in Grant and Kinman (2014), which provides in-depth guidance on developing a toolbox of strategies to help social workers build their resilience and protect their wellbeing.

As well as developing the personal resources associated with resilience (e.g. emotional literacy, bounded empathy, self-compassion and reflective ability) these interventions can protect mental health in social workers at different stages of their career (see Grant et al., 2014; Kinman & Grant, 2017; Kinman et al., 2019).

It is important to remember that employers have a legal and moral duty of care to protect the wellbeing of their employees. However, it should be emphasised that social workers also have a responsibility to maintain their emotional resilience to assure their continued fitness to practise. But while social workers need to be sufficiently resilient to meet the emotional demands of their work without burning out, strategies focused on the individual will not in themselves be enough: even the most resilient social worker will be unable to cope with toxic working conditions. Social workers must be supported by organisational policies and practices that enable them to flourish and do their best work. Multi-level, systemic interventions are therefore needed at both team and organisational level to support the development of personal resilience.

Building resilience: team-based approaches

Team resilience has been defined as 'a dynamic psychosocial process that protects a team from the potential negative effects of the disturbances they collectively encounter' (Morgan et al., 2013, p. 552). Disturbances can be external or internal factors that have the potential to threaten team functioning. These might include a dramatic increase in referrals, rising case complexity, and changes in team or organisational leadership, as well as everyday difficulties such as staff absence and turnover.

Building team resilience is crucial because it is greater than the sum of its parts. Resilience in a team goes beyond the collective personal resilience of its members. A resilient team is one whose members use their individual and collective resources to adapt positively to maintain wellbeing and performance, and to achieve common goals or purposes. Optimal collective functioning is particularly important in complex and uncertain environments such as social work and related multi-disciplinary teams, where effective collaboration within and between teams is vital.

These characteristics of team resilience expand upon the qualities of resilient individuals highlighted above.

Some examples are:

Resourcefulness:

employing members' personal strengths and resources to foster a culture of continuous improvement; developing processes that allow a clear focus on priorities.

Robustness:

having a sense of collective purpose, meaning and goals; adapting to change successfully and addressing issues proactively.

Perseverance:

maintaining a solution (rather than a problem) focus; persisting when faced with obstacles to success.

Self-care:

managing stress effectively and being aware of signs of overload and distress in other team members; prioritising individual and collective work-life balance.

Capability:

seeking feedback to identify what works well; building capacity through professional networks and other sources of support.

Connectedness:

being mutually cooperative and supportive; encouraging a sense of belonging and group identity.

Alignment:

coming together to meet desired goals; monitoring progress towards goal achievement; celebrating success but putting 'failure' in perspective.

Although generic frameworks for building resilience can be useful, it is important always to consider the specific requirements of a particular professional group. The following qualities expand on those above to identify the characteristics of a resilient team:

Sense of purpose:

there is a shared mission, vision and purpose; and a desire to work together to create change for children and families and adults with care and support needs.

Collective sense of responsibility:

there is recognition that everyone in the team has a key role to play, and people should share the load; networks are used to find solutions to problems.

Appreciation not blame:

success is recognised and celebrated; when mistakes occur, there is a genuine desire to learn from them rather than jump to conclusions or seek to attribute blame.

Conditions for reflection and challenge:

supervision is reflective and supportive, and not focused only on tasks; opportunities for reflection and growth are encouraged.

Positive mind-set:

crises are temporary; setbacks and crises are seen as opportunities for the team to come together and use a solution-focused approach to facilitate change.

Caring and inclusive leadership:

workers feel cared for and that their wellbeing is important; managers 'role model' healthy work-life balance and prioritise their wellbeing; managers understand their staff and use their emotional intelligence to show care and respect.

Building organisational resilience

Definitions of organisational resilience from the business world draw on the individual and team-based approaches outlined above. Typically, they describe an organisation's ability to recover and return to 'normal' functioning after facing a disturbing or unexpected event, through having strategies in place to manage such a situation. Although this is a crucial aspect of resilience across all fields of social work practice, a more nuanced understanding is needed of the conditions required to support social workers in leading, managing, recovering and learning from a traumatic event – for example, following the death of a child in children and families social work, or the suicide of a person using mental health services.

As well as supporting practitioners through distressing situations, organisational resilience is more commonly characterised by the ability to help them manage the day-to-day demands they experience. Although some characteristics of resilient organisations will be common to all types of job (e.g. manageable demands, adequate training, understanding of role), it is important to develop frameworks that meet the requirements of different sectors and are congruent with the needs and expectations of workers.

Introducing a systemic approach

Grant and Kinman's research with social workers supports the view that resilience is contextual, multi-dimensional and systemic. A resilient organisation seeks to understand how resilience can be fostered at individual, team and leadership levels to develop a working culture that supports wellbeing and optimum practice. What makes an organisation strong is not only the ability to manage shocks and respond to difficulties and setbacks, but also to implement initiatives that enable individuals and teams to do their best work. Examples of ways to enhance organisational resilience include ensuring leadership is fit-for-purpose, improving job content and the working environment, enriching support networks, building a culture that prioritises self-care, and sharing good practice.

In line with this systemic approach, initiatives at a public policy level also play an important role in improving workforce wellbeing. Recommended strategies include national workload management initiatives, recruitment and retention strategies, and risk assessments and 'pulse checks' to monitor workforce wellbeing over time (see Kinman & Grant, 2016). Guidance on using the Health and Safety Executive Management Standards approach to preventing work-related stress can be found in the Key Foundational Principle (KFP5) Wellbeing section later in the workbook. Introducing an evidence-informed 'emotional curriculum' to support resilience and wellbeing from recruitment to retirement is also a priority

It is generally agreed that stressors should be eliminated or reduced at source wherever possible, but a resilient organisation also requires strategies at individual and collective levels. The multi-level systemic approach shown in Figure 3 involves developing emotionally literate leaders, as well as resilient teams and resilient individuals. This can have a wide-reaching impact on the wellbeing and performance of the social work workforce.

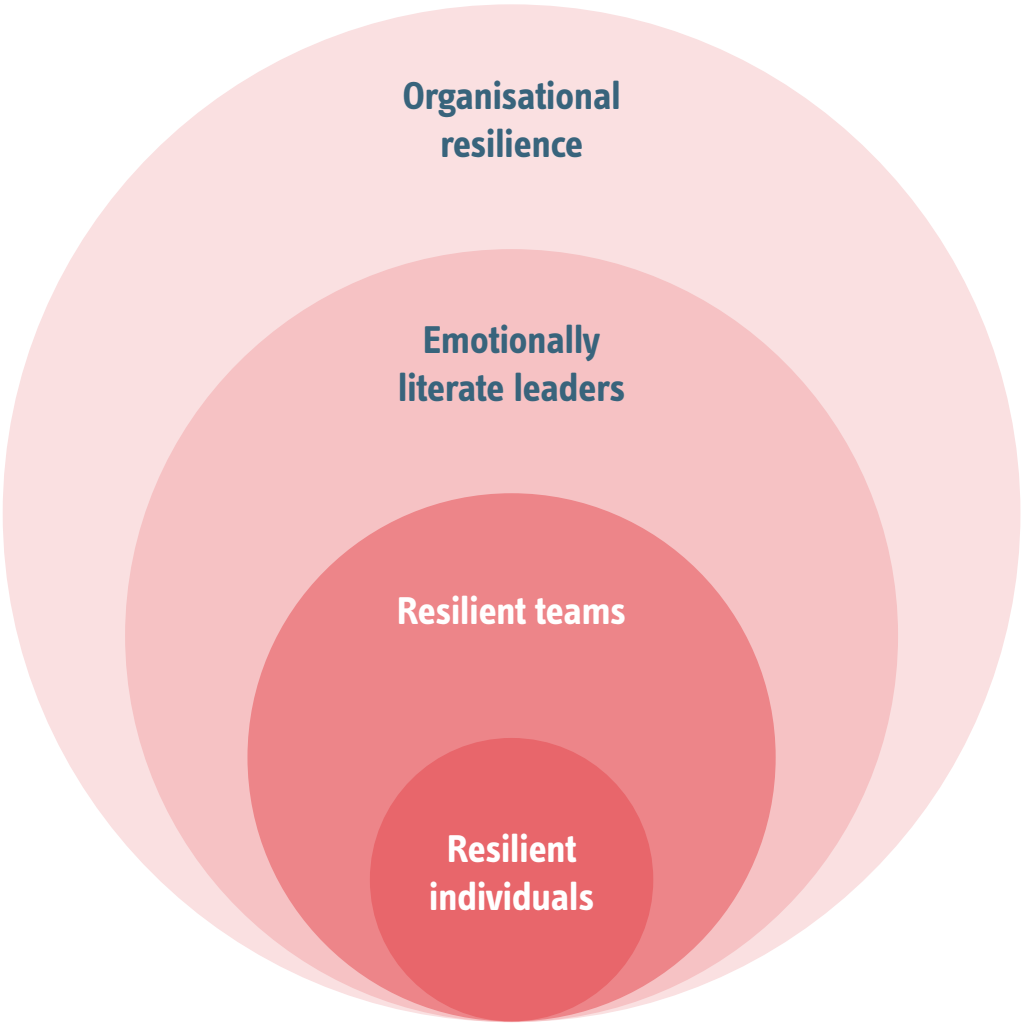

Figure 3: A multi-level systemic approach to building organisational resilience

The emotionally literate and ethical leader

Leaders are in a unique position to develop psychologically healthy workplace cultures as they have the power and authority to implement change. They therefore play a particularly important role in managing work-related stress by:

Prevention:	Training and development:	Support:
identifying signs of stress in practitioners at an early stage; supporting risk assessments and communicating their findings; working with teams, occupational health and human resources to develop appropriate interventions and adjustments to improve working conditions.	enabling practitioners to access appropriate training to reduce stress at individual and team levels.	being aware of the various ways stress can manifest itself and the need for support to be targeted according to individual need.

There are strong links between the behaviour of leaders and the wellbeing, satisfaction and performance of the workforce. The Health and Safety Executive (in collaboration with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and Investors in People) has developed a useful framework to help managers assess whether they have the competencies and behaviours found to be effective for preventing and reducing work-related stress in their staff. (For more information see the KFP5 Wellbeing section of this workbook.) However, leadership is a quality that is required at all levels, and every worker has a responsibility to develop the competencies and behaviours that can help prevent and reduce stress in others.

Ethical leaders are those who adhere to a set of moral standards underpinned by respect for the dignity and rights of others. They act as role models for ethical behaviour and decision-making and support their practitioners to grow as professionals. Crucially, ethical leaders prioritise the health and safety of their workforce and cultivate a sense of resilience in their organisation. There is evidence that positive leadership also contributes to fostering positive emotions among workers. Helping practitioners achieve their goals and praising them for good performance can build their psychological capital (i.e. resilience, optimism, hope and confidence), enhance their job commitment, satisfaction and performance, and help to protect them against burnout (see Kelloway et al., 2013).

Emotional intelligence, or literacy, is a particularly important quality in managers (Lopes, 2016). Characteristics of emotionally literate organisational leaders include:

Understanding self and emotions:

awareness of one's emotional state; insight into how emotions can influence thought processes and decision-making; the ability to attend to and 'repair' unwanted emotional states.

Understanding and relating to others:

an appreciation of how other people (might) think; an understanding of their impact on others; knowing how to get the best out of people using a 'tailored' approach; the ability to evoke positive emotions in workers; understanding how to develop cohesive teams.

Communicating effectively:

the ability to create the conditions required for effective communication; the ability to instigate difficult conversations, and to mediate, negotiate and manage conflict directly.

Strategies to help social work leaders and managers develop these skills are provided throughout the workbook.