

Burnout in social work: The supervisor's role

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on my supervisory practice in respect of burnout and is informed by current literature. It outlines how supervisors can best respond to prevent burnout, manage it if it occurs, and retain social workers in the profession following an experience of burnout.

KEYWORDS: Social work; supervision; burnout; retention

Introduction

Social workers want to make a positive difference in peoples' lives and a world that is just. Our work context often includes emotionally intense work with people in need or crisis (or supporting those providing that service), along with consistently high, and unrelenting, organisational and professional expectations—or that is how it can feel at times. When we continually witness people experiencing inequality, deprivation, suffering and desperation, and we do not feel valued or supported despite our best efforts, even the most experienced, skilled and resilient social workers are susceptible to *burnout*.

We all know about burnout and the importance of self-care to prevent it. However, as a seasoned supervisor, I have worked with a number of social workers who have burned out. This has led me to reflect on my supervisory practice in respect to burnout. What can I learn from their experience? How does current literature inform supervisory practice in this area? How can I and other supervisors best respond? While this reflection validated many current practices, I also discovered some ideas to incorporate into my practice going forward. I conclude that, if we are informed and skilled around burnout,

social work supervisors are best placed to support social workers in preventing it, managing it if it does occur, and supporting a return to work—and to the profession following a burnout—if this is what the social worker chooses to do. We understand the complexities and vulnerabilities of the social work role, and we have the vehicle of supervision.

Preventing burnout

Burnout is a commonly used term amongst social workers to describe a range of feelings, including tiredness, lethargy, negativity, and cynicism. It refers to job-related stress occurring over time that results in emotional exhaustion (feelings of being overwhelmed and worn out), cynicism (having become irritable, lost idealism, and withdrawn) and inefficacy (feelings of incompetence, lack of achievement and inability to cope) (Maslach, 2017). Rather than viewing burnout as an end-state, research is moving towards viewing burnout as a process (Maslach, 2017). This is useful because it suggests the possibility of intervening at any point when signs of stress or distress present and not waiting until a social worker hits the wall.

While my focus here is on the supervisor's role in supervision to prevent and manage

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burnout, it must be noted that supervisors and managers within an organisation have a legal obligation under Health and Safety legislation to monitor working conditions and general stress levels, and to address any organisational factors causing harmful stress. Organisation-wide interventions that improve work conditions, such as the introduction of flexible or reduced working hours, can mean people are more engaged and better able to cope with the challenges of the work and are, thus, better preventative strategies.

However, it is usually a range of factors and circumstances emanating from the job, the individual and the environment that lead to a person experiencing burnout—this is the circumstance that I am referring to and for which supervision can be valuable.

A review of the resilience literature confirms the value of effective supervision in reducing stress and burnout, turnover intention and retention of social workers with effective supervision consisting of four key elements: the professional relationship; reflective process; professional development; and emotional support and safety for the social worker and their practice (Beddoe, Davys, & Adamson, 2014).

Effective supervision begins with the supervisory relationship. I have found taking time to get to know one another to establish and maintain a healthy supervision relationship based on trust, transparency and openness to learning is critical to fully achieving the purposes of supervision. This involves having a conversation and subsequently drawing up a written agreement about the purpose and shared understanding of supervision; expectations of the supervisor and supervisee; and how you are going to work together to build trust and safety that promotes transparency and a willingness to be open and vulnerable in supervision. Issues around confidentiality and privacy need to be clarified—particularly when you are also the line manager.

Having a supervision agreement, however, is not enough for supervisees to engage fully in supervision that enables meaningful support and learning. I have found a number of key areas useful to explore in gaining engagement in the supervision process. These include a sharing of relevant personal history, including how our differences and similarities might impact our supervision relationship, the supervisee's history and expectations of supervision, their stage of professional development and, of course, self-care. Some useful areas for exploration of self-care I have found include what sustains the supervisee in the work, what is important for their wellbeing, how they know when stress is having a negative impact on them and how I as the supervisor would know. I offer new supervisees the "Professional Wellbeing Self-Assessment" tool developed in Aotearoa New Zealand by another supervisor and myself for supervisees to reflect on and map their professional wellbeing across seven dimensions of their current professional life (Hirst & Nash, 2013). The value of having a written wellbeing plan that is regularly reviewed has been reinforced in this process.

It is important to ensure supervision is regular—an hour on a monthly basis minimum. While being regular does not ensure supervision is effective, regular supervision contributes to a social worker's wellbeing by enabling a regular check-in on wellbeing, providing an opportunity to address any distress early and reinstitute self-care strategies. It also maintains the supervisory relationship, reduces isolation and the potential for poor practice and the consequences of that. Supervisors have a role in educating social workers about the value of regular supervision for their long-term wellbeing, and actively encouraging regular attendance including ensuring any missed sessions are rescheduled.

Supervision's benefits are realised when supervision is about facilitating reflective practice not just about organisational requirements and caseload management.

Supervision can provide a safe and private space in which social workers can stand back and look at ourselves in our work: where it is okay not to know and to ask for help, to make mistakes and learn from them and to process emotions arising in the work. As Weld (2017) asserts, being curious and reflective enables us to develop both personally and professionally and can lead to more self-compassion and self-forgiveness when things do not go right.

The social workers I have worked with who have burned out shared similar stories. They had high expectations of themselves in terms of standards of practice and ethics, and felt frustrated and overwhelmed when workload and administrative demands compromised these. They were working longer hours than they were employed for. They had not had regular or effective supervision and lacked management support. Sometimes they had not been clear about their role and boundaries had become blurred. In some, a specific case triggered the burnout. In all cases their usual self-care strategies had fallen away. They had stopped exercising, were eating more junk food, or eating less, drinking more alcohol, were not sleeping well, and had reduced their family and social activities to cope. Their personal and professional relationships had become strained. They had not recognised the seriousness of the signs, often dismissing them as being “just how it is” working as a social worker in this environment. Burnout came as a shock, seeming to happen suddenly, leaving them confused, exhausted and anxious. Because of the impact on their physical and mental health, they were all determined for it not to happen again. Key strategies they employed included making supervision a priority, attending regularly and enlisting the support of their supervisor to address stress and remind them of their self-care strategies to keep them safe from another burnout.

Self-care strategies that keep us healthy and fit enable us to be more engaged and effective in our work.

Besides the Professional Wellbeing Self-Assessment tool already mentioned there are online tools available that enable us to check in on our personal and professional wellbeing, for example, the “Work on Wellbeing Assessment” (WoW, 2019) that consists of a collection of validated psychometric scales and scientifically informed questions from the psychology literature that assess various aspects of wellbeing.

Many social workers apply the Tapa Whā model in their practice (Durie, 1994). Evidence exists that the model’s four elements of wellbeing are important in social workers’ reporting high levels of their subjective wellbeing (Graham & Shier, 2010). While we have our own ingredients that make up each element for our wellbeing, ensuring all of these elements are integrated in our self-care strategies is important and something supervisors can encourage and monitor.

There is evidence that mindfulness increases a feeling of wellbeing and positively affects the service social workers provide to their clients (McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011). Mindfulness practice can be challenging for social workers who are busy and stressed but the benefits of learning to appreciate who we are now, what is working well, what is good enough, and the goodness there is in the world cannot be underestimated in terms of improving our wellbeing. This can give us the strength and energy we need to work for social change and social justice—a task that is never done and cannot be done alone.

Managing burnout

If stress that is detrimental to our wellbeing is prolonged it can result in social workers “running on adrenaline” and unable to “see the wood for the trees” often due to fatigue, insomnia, lack of nutrition and substance misuse. Being in this state can result in complaints about their attitude/behaviour or performance, sometimes an

inability to get out of bed, go to work or face clients, physical illnesses, inability to make decisions, breakdown in relationships, resisting change, anxiety and/or depression. If this occurs, supervisees need to be advised (or directed) to see their GP for medical advice. In my experience, this often results in taking extended leave from work for sleep, rest, relaxation and a gradual return to activities such as exercise and healing to get their holistic wellbeing back on track. When the social worker is assessed as ready to return to work, a supervisor can advocate for a rehabilitative process that may involve part-time work or light duties until the social worker feels strong enough physically and emotionally to undertake their role fully. Supervisors also have a role in advocating for any organisational or environmental factors that contributed to the burnout to be addressed as part of a plan towards a full return to work.

Supervisees have benefitted from using supervision to debrief all the circumstances that led to them experiencing burnout to enable them to make sense of it and be able to develop a wellbeing plan that addresses all of the issues—job, environment and personal—that contributed. Going forward I intend to have available easy-to-read information about burnout, e.g., articles in the references section by Beddoe et al. (2014), de Montalk (2017) and Maslach (2017) and to design a poster that summarises the most common signs of stress in stages over time that could potentially lead to an experience of burnout. If a supervisee's stress is not alleviated, a therapeutic intervention may be required, such as ACT (Acceptance Compassion Therapy). This model includes tools relevant for supervisors to use in supervision and training can be readily accessed. I have rediscovered Brown and Bourne (1996), which outlines strategies supervisors can employ when working with supervisees experiencing stress and trauma.

Retaining social workers in the profession following burnout

Of course it is the decision of the social worker themselves as to their future employment; however, I have found those who have a planned return to work and engage in a process reflecting on their career to date including what brought them into social work and future options can enhance the likelihood of them remaining in their job and in social work. While we are not trained career counsellors, supervisors are well placed to explore a supervisee's fit with their current job and their career using reflective questions in supervision. This is particularly pertinent following an experience of burnout when social workers are often contemplating their future. Six areas of work life that can be used to assess a person's job-person fit have been identified (Maslach, 2017). If there is a perceived mismatch in these areas there is an increased likelihood of burnout and, conversely, the closer the perceived match the more likely the person will engage in the work. These areas are: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values—see Maslach (2017) for an explanation of each area. I intend to use these areas of work life as a new diagnostic tool to assess the suitability of a supervisee's current job.

It is common not to give much thought or planning to a career. While taking opportunities is valuable, giving some attention to career direction can also be helpful. An effective career plan is broader than work choices and needs to take a holistic approach including lifestyle choices, significant others and their preferences. A guided reflective process that begins with assessing the suitability of the current job, career to date, lifestyle preferences as well as work preferences for the future has proven helpful. Researching the work environment and preferences can follow, leading to decisions and action planning including supports and review. While such a process does not guarantee a social worker will choose to stay with their current employer, or in the profession, it does ensure that

decisions regarding their future are fully informed, considered and supported.

Conclusion

This reflection on practice and delving into relevant literature has reinforced how valuable and essential regular and effective supervision is in preventing burnout; and offers suggestions for the positive role supervisors and managers have in managing it if it does occur and for retaining social workers in the job and profession following an experience of burnout. It has resulted in my supervisory practice in respect of addressing burnout being enhanced.

I encourage other social work supervisors to also share their practice wisdom, so that our practice can be enhanced for the benefit of social workers and the profession.

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