

Fostering a Sense of Professional Resilience: Six Simple Strategies

Contributed by Ellen Fink-Samnack, LCSW, CCM, CRC

An occupational hazard presents for social work professionals time and again. We are prone to take care of others, both before and more than ourselves. I have referenced this theme countless times before, but recently had its importance emphasized while reading NASW's Center for Workforce Studies (2006) Executive Summary, *Assuring the Sufficiency of a Frontline Workforce: A National Study of Licensed Social Workers*. The contributions, commitment and strength of social workers to society's diverse populations was a powerful message of the report. However, a stronger voice spoke to the challenges faced for those entering social work as a vocation that mutually affect one's individual and collective professional identity.

The following key issues were identified in the summary:

an increase in barriers to effective practice and fewer support systems for effective practice
 12% of respondents planned to leave the workforce within two years
 increased challenges in retaining newly educated social workers

Like many fellow educators, I reinforce to my students the importance of a solid "sense of self" to their emerging social work identities. Our energy and commitment to practice takes root in that unique zone. But how can one begin to preserve that critical "sense of self" energy for the long haul in light of factors that lead to conclusions such as those cited above?

In the process of facilitating the journey of those who depend on us for our social work expertise, it is easy to forget one's need to self-nurture. If we do not embrace, promote, and replenish our "sense of self," we have few, if any, resources left to collaborate in any of the helping efforts that define social work practice. Resources are scarce enough without the loss of the most precious one—ourselves.

Let me pose several questions for your reflection:

Can you identify when you need to stop and listen to your body?
 Do you have a defined way to release the emotion(s) experienced from the intensity of practice?
 Do you have to be told that you should take time off or at least a "time out"?
 How often do you think, "I'm a social worker, so I can handle anything!" on one level, and "I'm a social worker, I should be more self aware" on another? (Fink-Samnack, 2006b)

Self-Care Strategies for Professional Resilience

In the spirit of fostering a sense of resilience and a greater sense of motivation for your social work endeavors, consider these easy strategies:

1. Take time to process experiences with a peer/colleague.

The stresses of professional practice have us on emotional overload. The tendency is to just keep working past this point! Know that feeling? Besides, then the emotion just dissipates over time and we don't have to deal with anything, right? WRONG! All that happens are those unresolved feelings add up and contribute to an inability to be objective. One also loses the ability to regain balance. There is no weakness in pausing a bit and finding some objective support. It is unfortunate, but in this current practice climate, social workers are no longer guaranteed a social work supervisor at their workplace to help identify and process their reactions. If you do not have the benefit of some supervisory input at your agency, or at least on a private basis, develop a colleague/peer support network on site!

2. Don't make rash decisions regarding personal or professional life.

Fight or flight? We have an emotional reaction to that which we experience and may make reactive decisions when feeling stressed that have implications we have not thought through. One might look to change careers, a personal or professional partnership, or residence. Be conscious of what is driving the actions—denial vs. well thought out "Revisioning" (Fink-Samnack, 2006a)

3. Don't feel guilty about having fun.

There are a myriad of emotions experienced when we go through the intensity of our clients' experiences—whether end of life care, psychiatric crisis, or emotional trauma. Recharging is an obligation to ourselves and the populations who rely on us. It's that simple!

4. Be conscious of needing "time out"!

Does more really need to be said here?

5. It is ok to pamper yourself to revitalize!

We give so much of our energies to those we work with, and revitalizing ourselves is essential. Make a list of what works for you or one that you are recommending this to. There is an infinite range from spa treatments to long walks, listening

to music, eating chocolate. What works for you?

6. Reframe the power of your frustration into advocating for your position!

Our response to the impact of issues around us is intense, whether lack of organizational support, decreased salaries, or failure to recognize the power of professional social work practice—even reading the results of studies on where practice tugs at our social work souls. Take this emotion forward and get involved with your professional association. Click on <http://www.socialworkers.org> to see what you can do!

Conclusion

The Bureau of Labor Statistics Industry Occupation Employment Matrix Report for 2004-2014 reflects a 19.6% increase in those anticipated to seek entry into the social work labor force. Social work's ongoing value to society is clear. But are you prepared to give yourself the attention needed to assure you are up to the task at hand for the duration of your career?

References

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