

I Want to Be a Social Worker, But...

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by Regina Trudy Praetorius, MSSW, LCSW, and Laura Lawson, MSW, GSW

We've been at this a while—about 10 years of experience between the two of us. We've heard "TONS" of reasons people aren't following the tug on their hearts to be in social work. {mosgoogle left}Okay, so you are no good at testing (licensure exam), you have no time (kids and a husband), the student loans from the first time around won't be paid until you retire. But, are you happy? Here are just some of the "excuses" we have heard and the responses we have given.

I'm too old...

NO YOU'RE NOT!!! Who says you are? Age does not matter when it comes to social work. In fact, it often helps. Just think of the experiences you have had that can be valuable in the learning process and in the field. Many times, your experiences with your own children or children you have worked with in the past can help you understand developmental processes and human behavior. Most of social work is based on real-life application. We call it working in the field. What better field to practice in than your own life? As you age, so do your parents. Experiences with your own parents or a spouse's parents can prepare you for work in geriatric social work. Work experiences in another field can also be good "training" and contribute to your broader understanding of society in general. So, of course you're not too old.

I've been away too long...

Contrary to popular belief, you will remember how to be a student again. Actually, "reentry" students (nontraditional students) usually outperform their younger counterparts. In social work, with the reflective nature of many of the assignments, this success is due partially to maturity and life experiences, but also to a stronger intrinsic motivation (i.e., you're paying the tuition!).

We do realize that a foundational fear here is being able to rise to the challenge. Reentry students often feel a need to prove themselves to their families, friends, other students, and especially themselves. The best advice we can give is dive in! Many of your professors understand what it means to be a reentry student...they were reentry students when they got their PhDs. Feel free to discuss your fears with them; they are social workers, after all! We are sure you will find reassurance and support from your professors and your classmates.

I'm afraid I'll take "it" home with me...

You may take home a client's problems at first, but you'll learn coping mechanisms through your classes and your field experiences. This is one of the reasons why there are field experiences built into all social work programs in the U.S. Common strategies we've learned are humor, relaxation techniques on the job (and a good massage after hours!), exercise, eating right, talking with your supervisor (who is under confidentiality agreements with you), getting away for lunch, chocolate, and an occasional pint of ice cream!

This is a valid concern and we want you to know that this is a reassuring sign to us. Being afraid of taking "it" home shows that your heart is in this!

I'm afraid I'll get too attached to my clients...

This is a gray area. Getting attached to a certain point is actually useful. One of our jobs when working with clients is building trust and rapport with the client. However, this can become "too attached" or delve into countertransference. This means that the client is fulfilling a role for you that is unhealthy for both of you, and it can lead to unethical behavior without proper attention. Even if this seems to be a helpful level in the relationship, it is NOT! It is important that we establish boundaries with our clients and maintain a professional closeness. Common struggles with client attachment include: a client is moving and you want to stay in contact, sexual and/or romantic attraction to a client, offering additional services to the client that are not offered by your agency (such as rides home, going out for meals, and gifts). Please visit the NASW Code of Ethics page at <http://www.naswdc.org/pubs/code/code.asp> for in-depth explanations of social workers' responsibilities to clients (Ethical Standard One).

I'm not into "touchy-feely"...

Good! We feel that physical contact with clients is a "no-no." However, some people define "touchy-feely" as being a caring, helping, empathic person who becomes a social worker to help others. Granted, we certainly came to social work because we are caring, helping, empathic people who want to help others, but we are certainly NOT "touchy-feely." So what on earth are we? Realistic and practical come to mind. When it comes to working with others, we go above and beyond as any social worker would. However, being realistic about our clients almost always takes the forefront. It can be detrimental to our clients to be too "touchy-feely." This goes back to being too involved with them. Being "touchy-feely" often equates to getting overly emotional about a client. This leads to losing objectivity and ultimately failing the client. This is a kind of "tough love" that social workers must show their clients. Rapport and trust are there along with empathy, but the nature of the relationship remains social worker-client, not friend-friend.

Also, please note that direct contact with clients is not the only form of social work there is. One of us works in program development and research, because she does not feel that direct contact is her forté. The other MUST work one-on-one with others to feel she is fulfilling her social work duty.

I have no experience...

Don't worry. You'll get it. As we said before, social work programs in the U.S. require field internships in which you'll get on-the-job experience. Both of us have ended up working in capacities we never intended because of the wonderful field experiences we had.

What about experience in another field? That's great! Social work is a very interdisciplinary field. Social work borrows from many fields. Perhaps you've been working in a human resources department. Guess what? Social work agencies hire people, manage people, and train people. What if you are an engineer? Engineers have great critical and analytical thinking skills. These skills are valuable when working with clients who have more than one presenting issue. Also, this will come in handy if you decide to go into administration or research. We have had the pleasure of being supervised by a social worker who has her bachelor's degree in fashion merchandising! Not only does she always dress to the nines, but her people skills acquired in her first career are invaluable in establishing trust and rapport.

I am already doing social work—what's the point?

The point is that having a degree in social work allows you to work toward licensure and expands your understanding of what you already know. After one of us worked in the field of social work for five years without a social work degree, going back to school for an MSW proved only to validate what had been learned "in the field" and create many experiences to use as topics for papers and class discussions. Having the degree and being eligible for licensure also opens myriads of doors for you, including more responsibility and higher pay. Also, this legitimizes our profession. For many years, anyone could call him or herself a social worker, whether a social work degree had been acquired or not. Now, most states require a degree in social work from an accredited social work program (visit the Council on Social Work Education at <http://www.cswe.org> for a list of accredited programs) and state certification. Many states are beginning to tell people in social work positions without a social work degree that they have to go to school or resign. In other words, GO TO SCHOOL and keep doing the great work you do!

Conclusion

Stop obsessing and apply already! Social work needs you. Your future clients need you.

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