



PSDP - Resources and Tools: Promoting emotional resilience

Introduction

A career in social work is fulfilling but emotionally demanding. There is evidence that social workers are at greater risk of work-related stress and burnout than most other professional groups (HSE, 2018; McFadden, 2015) and this fact can adversely affect their health and impair their job performance (Hussein 2018; Revalier, 2018). As practice supervisors, you play an important role in supporting social workers to do their best work, which enables them to thrive and grow in the profession.

To support your own wellbeing and that of others, you need emotional resilience, a protective personal resource that helps people to adapt well to changing situations and stressful conditions.

As well as the occupational risks to wellbeing, social work organisations are experiencing many challenges that can threaten the wellbeing of staff and the quality of service they provide. Factors such as rapidly changing social policies and frequent reorganisation, a ‘blame’ culture, rising caseloads and intervention thresholds, limited resources and cuts to services, as well as an increase in administrative burden, are likely to add to the pressures experienced by social workers and their supervisors.

It is crucial to recognise, therefore, that personal resilience is only one element of a systemic ecological approach to resilience, as outlined in figure 1 below.



Figure 1

Although emotional resilience can be developed, a ‘toolbox’ of skills is required. Drawing on research evidence, this knowledge briefing is designed to help you understand more about what it takes to

develop your own and others’ emotional resilience to help build a supportive culture in your organisation. It also provides you with a range of concrete tips and strategies to help you accomplish this.

What is emotional resilience?

Research with social workers has found that resilience is most commonly seen as a personal capacity that helps people ‘bounce back’ from difficulties and maintain their personal and professional wellbeing (‘Developing Resilience for Social Work Practitioners’ by Grant & Kinman, 2013). Being resilient does not mean that we should simply try to ‘keep calm and carry on’. Resilience requires the ability to respond to a challenge, setback or stressor by drawing on a wide range of personal, psychological and professional resources and capacities. This not only helps people manage adversity but gain strength from such experiences and further broaden their resilience-building skills. More details on these can be found in our book mentioned above but some of the key competencies are:

- > Self-awareness - the capacity for introspection and a strong sense of personal identity developed through reflection.
 - > Confidence and self-efficacy - positive beliefs and attitudes about oneself and one’s ability to exert control over one’s motivation, behaviour and the social environment.
 - > Emotional literacy - the ability to attend to, recognise and regulate moods in oneself and others, and how emotional states 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 - possessing a strong network of supportive relationships to draw on during challenging times both personally and professionally; 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 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 can occur.

It is also crucial to practice self-compassion, prioritise self-care and maintain healthy boundaries between work and personal life.

Social work and emotional resilience. Why are they important and how can they be developed?

There is a growing body of research that suggests emotional resilience is a protective factor for social workers. It buffers the negative impact of stress and emotional demands at work and enables them to maintain excellent practice in adverse situations. It has the potential to enhance job satisfaction and engagement, better allows social workers to flourish, and improves rates of retention. Resilient individuals also prioritise self-care, enabling them to be compassionate towards themselves and others. **The knowledge and skills statement for child and family practice supervisors (2018)** requires them to ‘recognise one’s own professional limitations, and how and when to seek advice from a range of sources and disciplines.’ This is at the heart of being an emotionally-resilient social worker.

Based on our research findings, the table on the following page sets out the key capabilities underpinning resilience and provides some examples of interventions to enhance these personal qualities. More information on these approaches can be found in a book by Grant and Kinman (2014) which provides guidance on a toolbox of strategies to help social workers build their resilience and protect their wellbeing.

Key resilience-building qualities	What does this mean?	Why is it important?	How can this can be enhanced?
Develop your emotional literacy	Attending to, monitoring and regulating emotional reactions to practice; being aware of the impact of emotions on decision-making.	The capacity to manage emotional reactions in oneself and others is central to social work. It is a particularly powerful component of emotional resilience. During stressful situations we often simply react rather than process thoughts and emotions accurately; learning to attend to our emotions and be aware of their impact is crucial for emotion regulation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Emotional writing: making notes on our emotional experiences can be an effective way of gaining insight into how they affect us. There is evidence that doing this for only two minutes a day has benefits for mental health. This technique will be useful to enhance the resilience and wellbeing of practice supervisors and social workers, and can also be used by workers as a more structured activity to prepare for supervision. > Use a mindfulness app such as Buddhify or Headspace to take five minutes out doing simple breathing exercises. This can have a calming influence, help us react better to stress and improve focus and clarity. Our research has found that mindfulness can help social workers enhance self-care and self-compassion as well as increase resilience and improve wellbeing.
Prioritising self-care and self-compassion	This involves practicing self-kindness and being tolerant of your own vulnerabilities and imperfections; acknowledging your strengths as well as your weaknesses; accepting that sometimes things will go wrong, but this is normal.	Self-compassion can improve coping abilities, reduce the risk of burnout and improve life satisfaction; it also underpins positive attitudes towards self-care and healthy behaviours.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Cognitive behavioural techniques (CBT) can help you to challenge faulty thinking patterns and negative self-talk. For example, if you make a mistake and tend to catastrophise (believing that others will judge you badly, or that this will be the end of your career) you can begin to challenge this using cognitive restructuring. Instead of accepting a faulty belief that encourages unreasonably negative thoughts about yourself, you could consider the evidence for and against this belief. Challenging yourself to think differently can encourage more positive self-talk. This will be an effective strategy for practice supervisors and their supervisees. The technique can also be used during supervision. > It is crucial for individuals to take responsibility for self-care but, to be truly effective, it should be an intrinsic part of a team dynamic and wider organisational culture. Ways to encourage self-compassion and practical self-care strategies could also be explored during team meetings and group discussions.

<p>Developing flexible coping</p>	<p>Having a wide repertoire of coping strategies (both problem-focused and emotion-focused) and selecting those which are appropriate to the situational demands.</p>	<p>Resilient people are adaptable and flexible. They use emotion-focused coping (which aims to change their negative feelings about stressful situations) and problem-focused coping (which tackles the problem at source). More flexible people are healthier and more satisfied.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Positive reframing can help you to manage a stressful situation. Optimistic thinking, trying to see an event in a positive light, can be a powerful way to transform your thinking. Confronting, handling and reframing a stressful situation can be effective, for example saying to yourself: ‘Relax. I’m in control. What skills do I have to handle this situation? What has helped in the past? Who can I ask who has handled something like this before?’ > Using social support is an effective problem and emotion-focused coping strategy. A resilient organisation will have an open culture where staff feel able to disclose their own support needs and how best to support others in particular situations (e.g. returning to work after a difficult visit). > Peer support and coaching provide a more formalised type of support to facilitate solution-focused approaches to challenges at work. (More details and some guidance can be found in Grant and Kinman 2014.)
<p>Enhancing reflective ability</p>	<p>Reflecting on actions, decision-making and emotional reactions to practice; communicating self-reflections with others and adjusting working practices accordingly.</p>	<p>Reflective ability is a key protective resource for social workers. Those who are better able to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and behaviours tend to be more emotionally-resilient and experience better mental health.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Consider keeping a reflective diary to explore emotional reactions to what you experience in practice (positive and negative). Be open to feedback and reflect on this. This will be useful for social workers to prepare for supervision. It would also be helpful for practice supervisors to use this technique to reflect on their emotional reactions to supervision. This would effectively role model the importance of reflective supervision and encourage team members to engage. > Celebrate success. When did you last feel your best self at work? What skills did you demonstrate and how could you use those skills to overcome future challenges? This technique can be used by social workers, but would also be useful to guide questions in individual and group supervision.
<p>Work-life balance</p>	<p>Setting clear boundaries between work and personal life to provide opportunities to recover from work demands both mentally and physically.</p>	<p>A healthy work-life balance is crucial for building resilience. Knowing how to switch off from work and allowing yourself the space and time to live a well-rounded life protects mental and physical health and job performance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Use an everyday activity at the end of the day, such as making a cup of tea, to act as a buffer between work and home. While the kettle is boiling, and the tea is brewing, note down any ‘to do’s’ for tomorrow. You can email them to yourself if it helps. Then drink the tea, let go of the day and begin to focus on home. Share effective strategies with other team members. Practice supervisors could also highlight the importance of ‘switching off’ in supervision and team meetings. > It is easy to become addicted to technology; constantly checking emails can become habitual and raise anxiety and stress levels. Taking a technology break is a key way of building resilience and ensuring recovery. It is crucial for practice supervisors to be role models for a healthy use of technology.

The emotionally-resilient social work team: the role of the practice supervisor

Although it is important for social workers to be emotionally-resilient, organisations have a fundamental responsibility for supporting the wellbeing of their staff. A working culture that supports wellbeing and optimum practice at the team and organisational level is therefore crucial. As a practice supervisor, you are in a unique position to help social workers develop their individual resilience by providing effective supervision, and by creating a supportive environment that enables them to thrive and do their best work.

The next section of this briefing provides some practical ideas as to how to build resilience in others by:

- > developing reflective practice in supervision

- > creating a team culture that supports resilience and provides a secure base from which social workers can practice optimally
- > promoting and modelling emotional resilience with the staff you supervise.

Developing emotional resilience in supervision

Research has found that effective supervision can not only mitigate the effects of workplace stress, but also leads to positive outcomes for employees. Beddoe and colleagues (2011) provide a helpful model that outlines the factors that contribute to the development of resilience in social workers. This is illustrated below in figure 2 and shows the key role supervision plays in nurturing resilience.

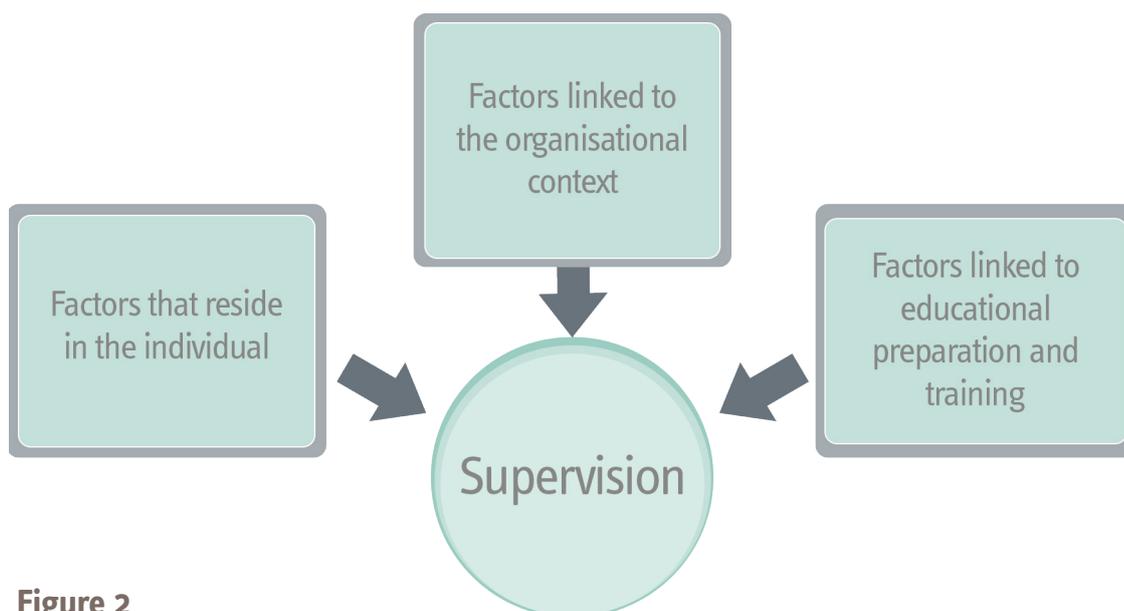


Figure 2

Carpenter, Webb, Bostock & Coomber (2012) describe supervision as ‘a professional conversation which should promote learning and reflective practice’. Effective supervision can promote wellbeing and develop reflection that, in turn, is likely to improve service delivery. Nonetheless, there is evidence that supervision needs to be a positive reflective learning experience to be truly beneficial.

As a practice supervisor, you are often faced with organisational demands that can encourage surveillance of social workers and promote a blame culture. In such a working environment, it is all too easy to make supervision purely managerial and based on compliance-focused agendas. This has adverse consequences, making social workers reluctant to voice their concerns and admit mistakes. They are also likely to become fixed in their thinking, shutting down a reflective mindset and a learning culture. By providing reflective space through supervision and critical analysis, learning and growth can be fostered. Supervision also offers opportunities for staff to unpack the complex emotional demands of social work practice and learning.

Social workers will be familiar with models such as Gibbs’ (1988) reflective learning cycle that recognises the need to look back over practice in order to learn and grow. Often though, supervisors forget or lose their ability to ask open, Socratic questions that facilitate reflective thinking. Knowing how to frame these questions in supervision requires expertise underpinned by effective listening skills. As a practice supervisor, it is important to use expansive questions beginning with ‘how, where, what, when and who’ as these will typically encourage reflection. ‘Why’ questions can discourage this type of thinking and result in defensive behaviors. By using this expansive approach, workers are empowered to find the answers to their own questions, thus increasing self-confidence, self-awareness and autonomy, all of which are linked to resilience.

Box 1 below outlines a few prompt questions you can use in supervision to encourage reflective conversations.



Box 1: Reflective questions for effective supervision

- > What were your thoughts and feelings regarding this situation?
- > What assumptions did you make about the situation beforehand? Have these changed or shifted?
- > How might your own history and experiences influence your thoughts, feelings and assumptions about the issue?
- > What perspective might the person you are working with have about the situation?
- > What appears to be most important to them?
- > What about the situation appears to elicit the strongest feelings or reactions for them, and why?
- > What new insights came from thinking this through?
- > How might you implement these new insights into practice?

Enhancing support

Ferguson (2009 p479) emphasises the need for social workers to be ‘emotionally held’ and have space to be heard. Containment and holding through supportive supervisory structures promotes a culture where social workers can feel safe and secure within an understanding and compassionate professional relationship.

As a practice supervisor, you are a crucial part of a team that can offer such support. Creating a safe environment can enable social workers to feel comfortable in voicing their opinions, where they know they can speak their mind without being embarrassed, judged or punished. A working environment where people feel closely connected with colleagues, and where support is reciprocal, is a key way of building resilience.

As a supervisor, it is crucial to create an atmosphere that balances safety and challenge, where social workers can withstand the emotional content of the work and reflect on the implications for their practice. As outlined above, reflective supervision can encourage such conditions.

Box 2 below offers some reminders to help you prepare for supervision to focus on worker wellbeing.



Box 2: Things to consider in preparation for supervision

- > Do I ask my supervisees about their wellbeing?
- > How can I facilitate a solutions-focused approach in my supervision?
- > What are my supervisee's real strengths?
- > How can I enable my supervisee to identify areas for development and set achievable goals?
- > How can I move away from an over-emphasis on a managerialist agenda to a more reflective one?

Creating a team culture of resilience

A resilient team is more than having a group of individually resilient people. It refers to a team culture or norms that support effective practice and a sense of collective efficacy. When individuals can openly discuss their strengths and concerns, collective resilience is strengthened, and team members feel empowered to share emotionally-distressing experiences. Although a team needs to offer their members a strong sense of security to be effective, members need to take appropriate risks to help them develop and grow. Even though you may not be line managing social workers directly, you can play a big part in developing a culture of resilience within your team. Below is some guidance on how to do so.

> Build trust

How do we build a sense of trust within a team? How will you know there is trust within that team? When people make a mistake or, conversely, when they are successful, the collective learning gained from these experiences should be shared. Trust is evident when people readily ask for help, admit to mistakes and skill gaps, and are prepared to disagree with the views of others. You will know trust when you see it, as people will help each other proactively, be prepared to show vulnerability and support each other when there are temporary spikes in workload.

> **Build commitment**

For teams to work effectively, they need to see how their role fits in with the mission and vision of the wider organisation. As a supervisor, you can point this out and encourage others to share goals and objectives.

> **Build a culture of shared responsibilities**

A typical 'high stress' job is where people have a lot of responsibility but lack autonomy over how they do their work. Engaging colleagues in considering how problems can be shared and resolved collaboratively can enhance a sense of control. Modelling professional curiosity about practice can give others the confidence to do the same.

> **Build a team that recognises individual strengths**

To be effective, a team needs a wide range of skills and experience. It is easy to think of social work as individualized. We rarely work in pairs or observe the practice of others. If we did perhaps we would learn and achieve more. Building a sense of collaboration and a culture where people can ask for a second opinion, or for someone to help do a joint piece of work, ensures that social workers are recognised for their skills and strengths.

> **Build cultural competence**

Practice supervisors need to develop a strong sense of cultural competence to build an inclusive and collaborative team. We all need to recognise unconscious bias in our practice. Creating culturally-sensitive supervisory practice is crucial. Social workers can experience racism, discrimination, exclusion, homophobia and stereotyping (in their practice and team) which may compound the stress that they experience from the job itself. This may also compromise their resilience. Practice supervisors therefore need to be vigilant to enable workers who have experienced discrimination to have a voice and a seat at the table. They also need to develop emotionally-literate leadership skills to recognise that workers may express distress and signal their need for extra support in various different ways.

Promoting and modelling emotional resilience with the staff you supervise

It is crucial for practice supervisors to prioritise their own self-care. Looking after your own wellbeing and developing personal resilience will enable you to not only grow and develop in the workplace, but also be an effective role model for others. Toasland (2007) calls this a ‘tightrope walk’ where supervisors are required to simultaneously manage and work in busy teams with increasing caseloads, avoid overloading staff and provide effective supervision. To support your own wellbeing and maintain your emotional resilience, you need your own reflective space.

You will need to develop your own competencies for resilience, but this is often easier said than done. Look back at box 2 on page 10 to remind yourself of how you can build your own resilience and also see box 3 to help you to prepare for your own supervisory meetings.



Box 3: Preparing for supervisory meetings

- > Am I aware what stresses me and when I need to use particular coping strategies?
- > Do I practice self-compassion and self-kindness?
- > Do I have an effective work-life balance and do I model this by taking a proper lunch break and not working excessive hours?
- > How do I deal with uncertainty and anxiety? What support do I have?
- > What are my feelings and emotional reactions to cases explored in supervision? Am I anxious, fearful, overconfident or complacent? What might the impact of such feelings be on my supervisee?

Conclusion

Social work is an exciting and fulfilling career that presents many emotional and intellectual demands. To enable social workers to protect their wellbeing while ensuring the best possible outcomes for people they work with, well developed and carefully integrated personal and organisational resilience resources are required. We hope that this knowledge briefing will help you as a practice supervisor to support the development of a truly resilient culture in your organisation and supervisory practice.



Learning points

1 Learning point 1

Developing personal and organisational resilience is crucial for enhancing wellbeing and job satisfaction and improving retention at work, as well as fostering a culture where good practice can thrive.

2 Learning point 2

As a practice supervisor, you can support resilience by developing healthy and effective supervisee-supervisor relationships based on reflective conversations.

3 Learning point 3

Self-knowledge is important for practice supervisors. Knowing your own stress triggers can help you anticipate problems and use a flexible coping style to overcome difficulties before they become entrenched.

4 Learning point 4

Self-care and self-compassion are not selfish or luxuries. It is important to role model personal resilience by ensuring you have a healthy work-life balance, and show reflective ability and healthy emotional regulation.

5 Learning point 5

An effective and resilient practitioner needs space for their own reflective practice.



Reflective questions

1 Reflective question 1

Do I practice self-compassion and prioritise my own wellbeing?

2 Reflective question 2

When faced with a challenging situation, do I draw upon a wide range of support networks to buffer stressful situations?

3 Reflective question 3

Do I role model a healthy work-life balance?

4 Reflective question 4

Do I prioritise my own need for reflective space and make opportunities for formal and informal conversations with others?

5 Reflective question 5

Am I mindful in my decision making and able to regulate my own emotional reactions and attend to those of others?



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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