Developing emotional resilience and wellbeing: a practical guide for social workers

Louise Grant and Gail Kinman

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Introduction

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for social work. At the time of publishing this guide, practitioners are concerned about their lack of personal protective equipment putting service users at risks, as well as themselves and their families. They are also telling Community Care about difficulties managing work when colleagues are self-isolating or sick. The worries being voiced most loudly are about the impact on vulnerable children and adults. Domestic abuse, child maltreatment and mental health problems could be worsened by the crisis, and meeting the care and support needs of disabled and older people must be managed while adhering to government guidance on social distancing. In this rapidly changing landscape, we know that different pressures may emerge in the coming weeks.

At Community Care Inform, we are working to do all we can so that our online resources can provide maximum support to social work teams in our subscribing local authorities and other organisations*. We also want to thank all social work and care staff for the incredible work that you continue to do, providing vital help to people in need of care, support and protection. Looking after your own wellbeing is always essential in the stressful jobs you do, but never more crucial then when you are under extra strain.

This is why we have made our guide to developing emotional resilience and wellbeing freely available to everyone. It's a comprehensive guide, based on what research says supports resilience in social workers and is full of information and ideas to use in your practice. If you are pushed for time and want to jump straight to techniques and tools to try, go to the final section: What can I do to enhance my resilience? (page 17).

The Community Care Inform Team

Accessing further resources on Community Care Inform

*A large number of local authorities and universities work with us so ask your manager, principal social worker or learning and development team if you already have access, or contact our helpdesk. Independent or agency workers can also enquire about individual licences. Tel: 0202 915 9444 Email: ccinformhelpdesk@markallengroup.com.

During this pandemic we are regularly updating our legal coverage of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and its implications for other legislation, and our links to useful resources for social workers practising during the outbreak. You can also find practice guidance, learning tools and legal information on a wide range of topics from attachment theory to criminal exploitation, deprivation of liberty to self-neglect. Click on the logo relevant to the service you work in to find out more.

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Contents

Louise Grant is interim executive dean of health and social sciences at the University of Bedfordshire. Her research has focused on supporting social workers to manage the complex nature of their work, and latterly on strategies to build organisational resilience.

Gail Kinman is an occupational health psychologist and visiting professor at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research interests encompass work-related stress, work-life balance, emotional labour, emotional intelligence and wellbeing.

Resilience and the coronavirus pandemic: a message from the authors

Part of being a social worker is to be resilient, dedicated, compassionate, calm and resourceful. During the coronavirus epidemic social workers will need to draw on these skills and qualities even more than usual.

> *But they must also be supported by a system that provides them with a secure base, appreciates their efforts, provides adequate resources, prioritises learning and, above all, supports their wellbeing.*

Organisations that are resilient will be better able to manage the shocks and challenges to the system created by the current pandemic.

Although how social workers respond to the current situation will vary according to their individual circumstances, it is crucial to practise self-care and self-compassion. In other words, you need to be as understanding and caring towards yourself as you are to other people.

> *Prioritising your own wellbeing is not selfish but vital if you are going to be able to sustain best practice in these difficult times.*

We hope that our guide to emotional resilience will help support social workers during this challenging period but we urge organisations to wrap support around their workers; this is crucial no matter how resilient we or others think we are.

Louise Grant and Gail Kinman, Spring 2020

What is emotional resilience?

Emotional resilience has become a buzzword in the helping professions. Although resilience has been incorporated into the "official discourse" of social work, it is important to consider:

• What does resilience mean?

• To what extent do we as social workers need to be resilient?

• Can resilience really protect our wellbeing and improve our professional practice?

• Perhaps most importantly, how can we build our resilience to help us thrive in a profession that, although rewarding, can be very stressful?

This evidence-based resource aims to provide some guidance to help you navigate your professional journey. Based on our own research and that of others, we highlight the importance of emotional resilience in protecting your personal wellbeing and enhancing your professional practice and suggest ways to help you develop this important quality.

'An evolving concept'

Due to the challenging and complex nature of the job, social workers, like other "helping" professionals, are at high risk of stress and burnout. It is therefore crucial to develop effective coping skills and strategies. There is evidence that emotional resilience can not only protect social workers from the adverse effects of work-related stress but also help you flourish in the profession and ensure the best possible outcomes for service users. This guide considers the meaning of resilience, highlights the factors that underpin this key quality and identifies how they can be developed.

Emotional resilience is a complex, multi-dimensional and evolving concept. Many definitions have been provided, but they typically refer to resourcefulness, flexibility, effective coping and the ability to "bounce back" from life's difficulties. For example, Pooley and Cohen (2010) defined resilience as "the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges".
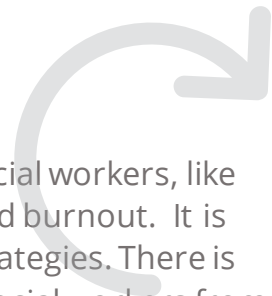
Our literature review found resilient people have some common attributes:

- Self-efficacy and self-esteem.
- Enthusiasm, optimism and hope.
- Openness to experience.
- A positive self-concept and a strong sense of identity.
- An internal locus of control (where an individual attributes success to their own efforts and abilities) and a high degree of autonomy.
- Self-awareness and emotional literacy.
- Self-compassion and the ability to prioritise self-care.
- Critical thinking skills.
- The ability to set appropriate boundaries.
- Well-developed social skills and the social confidence to develop effective relationships with people from different backgrounds.
- Flexibility and adaptability, drawing on a wide range of coping strategies and creative problem-solving skills.
- The ability to recognise and draw on one's unique pattern of internal and external resources.
- The ability to identify and draw on sources of support.
- Persistence in the face of challenges, setbacks and adversity.
- A sense of purpose and the ability to derive a sense of meaning from difficulties and challenges.
- The ability to learn from experience.
- An orientation towards the future.
- A sense of humour.

Emotional resilience is not simply a quality of the individual, but a dynamic interplay between personal characteristics and supportive external factors. Our own research shows that social workers who are more resilient are those who can maintain positive relationships in their personal and working life, access support from a range of sources, demonstrate appropriate empathy, draw on a range of coping styles, and successfully manage and contain their own and others' emotions.

> *More resilient social workers are also able to set firm physical and emotional boundaries between the work and home domains, reflect constructively on their practice and derive a sense of meaning from the challenges they face.*

This does not mean that resilient social workers are super-human and free from life's difficulties. They face the same problems as others but tend to manage setbacks constructively and persevere in the face of difficulties. Resilient people also experience negative feelings, such as frustration, anger and anxiety, but balance them with positive experiences and emotions and put any "failures" in perspective. Over time, these positive experiences and emotions broaden and build personal resources rather than depleting them, thus leading to resilience. Resilience is also self-sustaining: for example, flexibility and self-compassion will help you develop other skills and resources.

Organisational resilience and employers' responsibilities

This resource focuses on individual approaches to enhancing resilience, but this is only one element of a systemic approach to supporting staff wellbeing. It is generally agreed that social workers have some responsibility for protecting their wellbeing in what can be a highly stressful job.

> *Although there is evidence that emotional resilience can be helpful, even the most resilient social workers will be unable to manage, let alone thrive, in toxic working conditions.*

Employers have a legal and moral responsibility to safeguard the wellbeing of their staff. The risk that resilience can be used to divert attention from the structural and organisational sources of stress towards building individual capacities is widely recognised (Grant and Kinman, 2014). There is also the potential for social workers who are unable to cope with increasing work demands and diminishing resources to be blamed for being insufficiently "resilient".

We have developed a model that reflects the need for a more systemic approach to supporting resilience in social work (see below and also see Grant and Kinman, 2016 for an explanation). Our work focuses on building resilience at an organisational as well as an individual level, via interventions that aim to foster resilient social work teams and resilient leaders (see figure).

The UK Health and Safety Executive provides an evidence-based framework for employers to help organisations diagnose and manage key workplace stressors (such as demands, control and support). They have also developed a tool to enable managers to assess whether they currently have the behaviours identified as effective for preventing and reducing stress at work.

Right: a model for supporting resilience in social work

'Ordinary magic'

In conclusion, there is no great mystery to resilience. It is not an innate characteristic or personality trait, nor is it a lucky charm that protects people from all ills. Ann Masten, a professor of child psychology at the University of Minnesota, calls resilience, "ordinary magic" (2009).

It typically arises from effective adaptation to everyday events rather than unusual ones, and emerges from ordinary human capabilities, relationships and other internal and external resources. Our research has also found evidence that resilience can be enhanced via the development of the key characteristics that underpin this important quality. This is discussed more later in this resource after we consider the importance of resilience for social workers.

Why is it important to be resilient?

Social work is a rewarding but stressful occupation. It is crucial to manage workplace stress effectively as it is closely linked with a range of physical and mental health problems, impaired work performance and absenteeism. A survey of social workers published in 2018 by the British Association of Social Workers highlighted increasing workloads and growing levels of stress. UK social workers also appear to be at greater risk of burnout than many other professional groups. A survey of 1,000 social workers conducted by Unison in 2019 reported that less than 20% of respondents found their workloads manageable and more than half (56%) were considering leaving the profession for a less stressful job. The findings of BASW survey found that 61% of a sample of 3,000 were considering leaving, an increase of nearly 10% from the previous year.

The need for social workers to develop the resilience required to help them manage stress effectively and provide a high quality service is widely recognised. It is now also recognised that social workers and those in training need to demonstrate that they are emotionally resilient, able to protect their own personal wellbeing, and capable of adapting to the changing demands of the job. Clearly, resilience is a key quality for the job

but serious concerns have been expressed that many social workers are not sufficiently resilient to survive in their career. It is therefore important to identify ways to help enhance resilience in the profession.
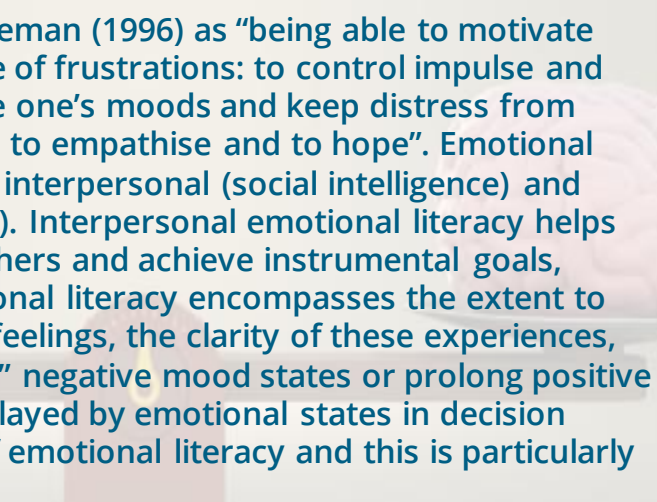
Developing emotional resilience will help social workers adapt positively to demanding working situations and enhance their professional growth. The concept of resilience might also help to explain why some practitioners who experience high levels of stress at work not only fail to burn out, but may even thrive enabling them to manage future challenges more effectively. Our own research indicates that the benefits of resilience are wide-ranging: more resilient social workers are more mentally and physically healthy, experience less stress, and use more adaptive coping strategies. There is also some evidence that more resilient social workers may have better relationships with service users, so enhancing their professional practice.

Resilience – the underlying competencies

To help social workers and their employers develop their emotional resilience, several competencies have been identified in the research. These are outlined in turn in the sections below. Where relevant, some guidance is provided to help develop these competencies, but more focused interventions are described later.

Emotional literacy (or emotional intelligence)

This is defined broadly by Goleman (1996) as "being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations: to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathise and to hope". Emotional literacy has two components: interpersonal (social intelligence) and intrapersonal (self-awareness). Interpersonal emotional literacy helps people relate effectively to others and achieve instrumental goals, whereas intrapersonal emotional literacy encompasses the extent to which people attend to their feelings, the clarity of these experiences, and how well they can "repair" negative mood states or prolong positive ones. Awareness of the role played by emotional states in decision making is also a key aspect of emotional literacy and this is particularly relevant to social work.

The capacity to manage our own emotional reactions and those of others effectively, often in challenging care environments, is central to social work. Morrison (2007) has highlighted the relevance of emotion management skills to key social work tasks such as engaging users; assessment and observation; decision making; collaboration and co-operation; and dealing with stress. Our own research has found that emotional literacy is one of the most important factors underpinning resilience in social workers (Kinman and Grant, 2010). We found that those who are more adept at perceiving, appraising and expressing emotion, who can understand, analyse and utilise emotional knowledge, and who are able to regulate their emotions effectively are not only more resilient to stress, but more mentally and physically healthy.

Research findings suggest that people who are more emotionally literate are typically more enthusiastic, optimistic, confident, trusting and co-operative – all desirable attributes for social workers. Emotional literacy has important implications for job performance, as it tends to foster effective decision-making abilities as well as communication skills. A social worker whose emotional literacy skills are under-developed may have problems developing "appropriate" empathy, escalate conflict by reciprocating in kind when faced with hostility and lack of co-operation, or allow emotions to unconsciously influence decision making. They may attempt to "repair" negative mood states by "self-medicating" through comfort eating or drinking alcohol to excess. Insight into how emotional literacy can be enhanced is therefore vital for practice as well as personal wellbeing.

Reflective thinking skills

By encouraging insight into practice, personal reflection enhances professional development and, in turn, improves the service we provide. Reflection helps workers consider how to adapt practice to individual service users' needs and develop solutions to apparently intractable problems. The development of reflective thinking skills can also help social workers explore the dynamics of rational and irrational thoughts, emotions, doubts, assumptions and beliefs and the ways in which they have an impact on their practice.

Based on research with medical practitioners conducted by Aukes et al (2007), we found it useful to examine three interlinked elements of reflective thinking:

- **Self-reflection** ("I want to know why I do what I do").

- **Empathetic reflection** ("I am able to understand people from different cultural and religious backgrounds").

- **Reflective communication** ("I am open to discussion and challenge about my opinions").

There is evidence that social workers whose reflective abilities are more highly developed tend to be happier. Our own research has shown that reflection is an important self-protective mechanism for social workers, as those who are better able to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and beliefs, who are able to consider the position of other people, and who can use their reflective abilities to communicate effectively with others were more resilient to stress and more mentally and physically healthy.

Empathy

Empathy is a fundamental component of all helping relationships While empathy is essential to forging effective relationships between social workers and service users, the job role frequently requires them to develop and cultivate empathy in other people. Early conceptualisations of empathy tended to see it simply as the ability to walk in other people's shoes – to take their perspective in order to understand their feelings, thoughts or actions.

We have found that multi-dimensional models of empathy are more useful as they encompass empathetic concern (feelings of warmth, compassion and concern for others) and personal distress (feelings of anxiety and discomfort resulting from the negative experiences of others) as well as perspective taking (adopting the positions of others. This approach acknowledges that empathy is complex and does not always have beneficial effects.

Our research has provided some insight into the role played by empathy in supporting the resilience and wellbeing of social workers. Empathetic concern appears to enhance emotional resilience, whereas empathetic distress tends to diminish it and is likely to have negative effects on mental health more generally (Grant, 2014). This suggests that a certain degree of empathy can benefit wellbeing, but over-empathising with service users can lead to over-involvement and increase the risk of burnout.

"Appropriate" empathy is therefore vital for social workers to make genuine attempts to acknowledge and accept what their service users think and feel. Nonetheless, it is vital for staff to develop clear emotional boundaries to ensure that healthy empathetic concern does not spill over into empathetic distress, which will have negative implications for their service users as well as themselves. It should be acknowledged though that emotional boundaries should be sufficiently flexible to allow feelings to flow in and out, otherwise you are unable to develop empathetic connections with others.

Social competence

Like other professionals, social workers need well-developed communication skills, social confidence and the ability to be assertive when required. There is a general assumption that members of the helping professions are "naturally" highly socially skilled, so little training is available. Nonetheless, our research (Grant and Kinman, 2014) found considerable variation in levels of social confidence among social workers which suggests that some may need help to enhance their social and communication skills.

Social workers are often faced with challenging interpersonal situations but being well prepared can improve their self-confidence and communication skills, enabling them to feel stronger and more comfortable. Role play during supervision or with a peer can help you prepare for unfamiliar or potentially difficult situations (such as emotionally challenging conversations with service users or court appearances) and enable you to practise authoritative but empathic responses more generally.

Acting out potentially difficult scenarios in a safe environment helps develop a compassionate but authoritative approach and improves self-confidence when handling real-life situations.

It also provides important information about how other people may respond to us in situations and the strategies that may be most (and least) productive.

Social confidence is a key factor in developing emotional resilience and supporting effective relationships with service users. It also helps us develop strong and supportive social networks with colleagues, friends and family, which is also another element of emotional resilience.

Social support

Social support refers to positive psychosocial interactions with others with whom there is mutual trust and concern. There is strong evidence that people with more social support tend to be less stressed and more physically and psychologically healthy – indeed research findings indicate that loneliness is as detrimental to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2015). Mutually supportive relationships also foster feelings of connectedness, belonging, and empathy with others, all important qualities for social workers.

Social support can come from many sources, such as peers, colleagues, family and friends, and pets, as well as membership of associations and clubs and wider community ties. Social support comes in many guises, such as emotional support (esteem, attachment and reassurance), informational support (the provision of advice, guidance and feedback), companionship (a sense of belonging) and instrumental support (tangible help and financial assistance). Relationships with family and friends are important resources to help social workers manage the emotional impact of their work. Fostering mutually supportive relationships from within your personal and

professional networks is also beneficial as co-workers are better able to understand the trials, tribulations and rewards of social work and can reinforce the value of the work you do. Peer relationships can also provide you with alternative perspectives and options for solving problems that may initially seem to be intractable.

An important part of the social work role is to support service users. Although this can enhance your wellbeing and build confidence, it can be emotionally draining and lead to burnout. In terms of your own social support, it is important to recognise that people with very wide social networks may not necessarily receive support, as their relationships may be superficial, or the support could be one-sided. A key skill is the ability to identify the type of support you need and where it can best be found. For support to be truly beneficial it must closely "match" what you need at the time. For example, people may require informational support (such as advice or guidance) to resolve an issue of concern but instead be offered emotional support (such as sympathy or nurturing). This may help them manage distress initially but not solve the problems that actually caused it.

Supervision and organisational support

To build and maintain emotional resilience, social workers not only require informal social support, they also need formal support through supervision and from the wider organisation. There is strong evidence that supervision, provided on a regular basis within a mutually trusting relationship, is an effective source of support for social workers.

While supervision is not therapy or counselling and cannot address deep-seated psychological problems, it is an appropriate environment to discuss the range of emotions that social work practice can invoke and, in turn, foster emotional literacy and resilience.

Social workers frequently experience strong emotional reactions to service users' negative or traumatic experiences. They may experience anxiety, feel emotionally manipulated and/or over-empathise with service users. The role of supervision in exploring and making sense of conflicting emotional reactions and enhancing social workers' emotion management skills is well recognised. To maximise its effectiveness, reflective supervision should create a "safe space" for emotional thinking and reflection about ethical and practice-related issues, and conditions where practitioners can be nurtured and helped to flourish. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that social workers may feel unable to explore their emotional reactions, and there may be barriers to the genuine expression of feelings by the supervisee and also by the supervisor.

Supervisees may believe that emotional disclosure is not appropriate in supervision, which can encourage a task-orientated perspective, or fear being judged as weak or vulnerable. In turn, the supervisor may worry about being overwhelmed and concerned that they will be unable to manage or contain the feelings expressed. For reflective supervision to be productive in enhancing resilience and professional practice, social workers need to develop self-awareness to manage these barriers effectively.

Optimism and hope

There is evidence that optimistic people are more resilient, healthier and happier than pessimists (Chang, 2001). Optimism is generally seen as a stable disposition underpinned by the expectation that more good things will happen than bad, whereas the opposite is true for pessimism. It may be more useful, however, to see optimism and pessimism as explanatory styles or biases that influence how people interpret events.

Personality traits are generally seen as stable ways of seeing the world, oneself and other people, but explanatory styles are more amenable to change. A person with an optimistic explanatory style will see themselves as responsible for positive events occurring (internal), will think that more positive things are likely to happen in the future (stable) and will believe that other aspects of their life will also be positive (global). On the other hand, optimists tend to see negative events as untypical (isolated) and irrelevant to other aspects of their life or future events (local). For example, if an optimistic social worker is promoted, they are likely to see this as a reward for good work (internal) and think they will receive recognition for their hard work in the future (global and stable). If they are not promoted, they will typically attribute this to extenuating circumstances (external) or because they need to work on enhancing their skills (internal) but feel able to improve their performance in the future.

Pessimists have a negative explanatory style, in that they tend to accentuate the negative and minimise the positive. A pessimist is hampered by self-doubt and negative expectancies about the world and other people; when positive events occur, they will see them as flukes (local) caused by luck or circumstances outside their control (external) that

are unlikely to occur again (unstable). Alternatively, pessimists believe that negative events are caused by them (internal), that more mistakes will occur in future (stable) and this is outside their concontrol (global). For example, if a pessimistic social worker had a negative experience with a service user, they will typically blame this on their poor performance, think that they will let down all other service users in the future, and that they are clearly unsuited to the job. It is also common for pessimists to overlook opportunities that present themselves, as they fail to recognise them as such.

Pessimism can also be used as a coping mechanism by anxious people. Defensive pessimists tend to lower their expectations to help them manage anxiety, fear and worry in order to help them work productively. They carefully review all of the negative things that might happen, preparing themselves for the worst case scenario. This can be a useful coping strategy as it helps reduce their anxiety so that they can plan and act effectively. However, if defensive pessimists try to raise their expectations, or avoid considering worst case scenarios, their anxiety can increase and their performance suffer.

> *Social work is generally an optimistic and positive profession. A strong belief in people's abilities to change is central to practice, as is striving to empower service users to find solutions to their problems.*

As mentioned above, an optimistic outlook is a key element of resilience. Optimism can be enhanced by the positive reappraisal or reframing of past events and encouraging coping through problem-solving (see the section on coping below). Being an optimistic social worker does not mean that people should try to see a silver lining in every cloud – flexible optimism is required, where positive perspectives are grounded in reality.

It is also important to recognise that unrealistic optimism can encourage risk-taking behaviour. Social workers should also avoid becoming biased in their use of an optimistic explanatory style. This can lead to collusion with service users, where difficult conversations and decisions may be avoided when change is not going to be quickly achieved, or where there is a build-up of setbacks that indicate risk. It is therefore essential that reflective practice involves a regular "optimism/pessimism check" to ensure that this is flexible, realistic or not subject to bias. Supervision can be used to encourage a realistically optimistic outlook and explore any concerns.

Coping skills and flexibility

Coping is defined as the process of managing external and internal demands that tax or exceed the resources of the person. There are many ways of coping with stress. Their effectiveness depends on the type of demand experienced, the individual, and their circumstances. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) highlighted two main types of behavioural and psychological responses that people use to cope with demands: emotion-focused and problem-focused coping.

Problem-focused coping aims to tackle the situation that is causing stress directly and is used when the situation is seen as changeable. Emotion-focused coping aims to change negative feelings about stressful situations; this tends to be used when people believe that nothing can be done to change the problem. It should be emphasised, however, that even in situations that may seem intractable, it is possible to utilise problem-focused coping such as goal setting and positive reappraisal. A goal-oriented approach builds resilience as it encourages feelings of mastery, control and effectiveness and contributes to positive emotions during difficult times.

A further distinction can be made between active and avoidant ways of coping. Active coping strategies are behavioural or psychological responses designed to change the nature of the problem itself or how one thinks about it, whereas avoidant coping strategies involve activities (such as alcohol use) or psychological responses (such as denial) that stop them from addressing the problem directly.

Active and avoidant coping strategies include:

- **Active coping**: taking active steps or initiating direct action.
- **Planning**: thinking about how to deal with a problem; developing strategies.
- **Seeking social support for instrumental reasons**: seeking advice, assistance or information.
- **Seeking emotional social support**: getting moral support, sympathy or understanding.
- **Suppression of competing activities**: avoiding being distracted by other tasks or issues.
- **Turning to religion**: seeking spiritual help and finding comfort in one's faith.
- **Positive reinterpretation and growth**: making the best of a situation by seeing it in more positive terms.
- **Restraint**: waiting for the right moment to act; avoiding rushing into action.
- **Resignation/acceptance**: accepting the reality of a challenging situation.
- **Focusing on and venting emotion:** focusing on the distress and expressing feelings.
- **Denial**: refusing to believe the problem exists or trying to deny it is happening.
- **Mental disengagement**: using activities to distract from thinking about a problem.
- **Behavioural disengagement**: reducing efforts to deal with a problem.
- **Alcohol/drug use**: using drugs as a way of avoiding the problem, or to feel better.
- **Humour**: laughing and joking about the situation.

Active coping strategies (whether behavioural or emotional) tend to be more effective in dealing with problems than avoidant strategies. Our research found that social workers tend to use a range of coping strategies but were more likely to use active forms of coping such as planning and positive reframing. Strategies such as seeking emotional and instrumental support, self-distraction, venting emotion and acceptance were also common. Our findings also revealed that social workers who used rational coping more frequently were more resilient and reported lower levels of stress and mental health problems, whereas avoidant coping tended to lead to poorer wellbeing and less resilience.

To some extent, coping styles are situational and change over time. Attempting to cope with different types of problems in the same way may not be productive and may even be damaging to ourselves and service users, but people tend to favour particular coping strategies. We have found that a flexible repertoire of coping styles enhances the capacity for resilience and wellbeing.

> *The ability to recognise that a coping strategy is ineffective in a particular situation and to try alternatives is a key competency.*

So, having a toolkit of coping mechanisms and being flexible in using them is likely to help you find effective ways of managing and coping with the stress of practice.

Social workers should reflect on their habitual ways of coping with stress and whether they need to adjust or change their coping strategy if it fails to be effective in a particular situation. Continuing to use an ineffective coping mechanism may not improve the situation and could even make it worse. For example, it may be that taking time out to "unpack" a stressful or emotionally-charged situation has helped you to manage in the past, but on this occasion you find you are still ruminating over the situation without a solution. It may be more productive to use an alternative strategy (such as reframing or accepting an unchangeable situation without self-blame) and move on.

Self-compassion and self-care

Compassion towards the self as well as others is essential to sustain the wellbeing of helping professionals.

Self-compassion is thought to have three components, each with opposing states: a) self-kindness v self-judgment: being warm, patient and understanding towards ourselves when we suffer, fail or feel inadequate instead of being self-critical and hostile; b) common humanity v isolation: recognising that suffering and personal inadequacy are part of the human condition, rather than something differentiating us from others; c) mindfulness v over-identification: taking a balanced and accepting approach to our negative emotions, so feelings are not avoided or exaggerated.

We have found that social workers who are more compassionate towards themselves are more mentally healthy and are better protected from the negative impact of the emotional demands of the job on their wellbeing. Our research has also found that social care professionals may consider themselves to be self-compassionate but are often reluctant to prioritise their own wellbeing over other people's needs as this can be considered self-indulgent or even selfish. Compassion-focused expressive writing can help reduce self-criticism and promote self-reflection and may also be effective in enhancing self-compassion (see later). Mindfulness and peer-coaching, discussed below, are also likely to be beneficial.

What can I do to enhance my resilience?

Research has highlighted several social and emotional competencies that are likely to build resilience in social workers. In this guide so far, we have highlighted some of the competencies that underlie resilience, but what can be done to enhance them? Developing resilience is hard work, but a sound investment in your future wellbeing.

As discussed above, you will need to protect your own physical and psychological health, manage stress effectively, maintain your emotional equilibrium, foster supportive relationships at home and work, maintain a positive outlook, and ensure an effective work/life balance.

To help you develop your personal resilience "toolbox" we include some strategies below and describe in more detail several strategies that our own research has found to be beneficial. These are:

- Mindfulness and relaxation.
- Thinking skills (cognitive behavioural techniques).
- Utilising supervision for reflective practice.
- Peer coaching to enhance support.
- Self-awareness and action planning.
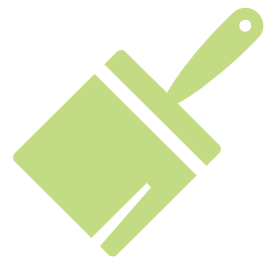
Mindfulness and relaxation

Mindfulness is an effective stress management tool. It can help you manage stress and anxiety, as well as enhance emotional literacy and self-awareness, aid critical reflection and facilitate active listening. Our study with social workers (Kinman, Grant and Kelly, 2019) found that a short mindfulness training course increased levels of emotional self-efficacy, flexibility, compassion satisfaction and self-compassion, and reduced stress and feelings of compassion fatigue.

We often find ourselves worrying about past mistakes and being anxious about the future, rather than focusing on the present. When we are mindful, we do not dwell on the past and do not judge or reject what is happening in the moment. Mindfulness combines meditation, breathing techniques and paying attention to the present moment without judgment to help people change the way they think, feel and act.

Exercise to practise mindfulness
The aim of the exercise is to completely focus on your breathing for a set period of time.

Check your watch and focus completely for 60 seconds on your breathing. Empty your mind of all other distractions; this is harder than you think. Keep your eyes open and be ready to catch yourself if your mind wanders off.

It can take a great deal of practice to be able to really focus on just your breathing. Use this technique at times of the day when you need to relax and refocus or when negative thinking begins to creep in.
Mindfulness is not purely designed to end with the development of concentration or the ability to focus attention on a particular object (such as the breath). With practice, mindfulness can generate energy, clear headedness and joy. It can help us gain deep insight into our own emotional state, and gain a clearer, compassionate and non-judgmental understanding of ourselves.

Thinking skills (cognitive behavioural techniques)

We all have days when negative thinking comes very easily. However, we can fall into a pattern of negative thinking that can lead to self-blame and anxiety and drain our energy. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is underpinned by the notion that how we think about events has a powerful influence on how we feel about them, and that our thoughts and beliefs are not facts but open to interpretation.

CBT techniques help people develop alternative strategies to manage emotional or behavioural problems by challenging the ways in which they think about situations. There is evidence that interventions based on CBT principles can help health and social care professionals manage negative emotions, reduce emotional distress and build confidence. Our 2016 research with NQSWs found that a multi-modal intervention that included CBT was effective in enhancing several personal resources associated with resilience, as well as mental health more generally.

Understanding the principles of CBT and applying them to your own thought processes has strong potential to help regulate your emotions and, in turn, build resilience. This technique can also help you develop a more optimistic explanatory style (see above). Knowledge of commonly experienced thinking errors and the impact these may have on the way you feel, combined with techniques for challenging negative and worrisome thoughts, can help manage anxiety, improve self-esteem and create a more positive problem-solving. Here's a simple example:

> *"If only I had known that Jake was going to take an overdose I could have prevented this. I must be a really poor social worker not to see the signs. I am so worried I am not going to be able to manage working in a situation like this again."*

We know that we are never totally responsible in a situation like this, but sometimes self-blame and anxiety can overwhelm us. It is important to develop a new way of thinking about such scenarios that is more realistic. Think about what you would say to a colleague who was in a similar situation and try and apply it to yourself; consider a different way of thinking about the situation and rate how much you "believe" your new belief and re-rate your old belief.

It may take several attempts to shift your old, maladaptive belief towards a more positive thought pattern such as:

> *"I feel really sad that Jake took an overdose and want some support to help me reflect on what I and others may have been able to do, if anything, to prevent this from happening. I know that there are things that I can learn from this experience and plan to do all I can to do this."*

Also, catch yourself when you use terms such as "should", "must" and "ought". These words imply personal failure and lead us to make demands on ourselves and others. Try to replace them with less critical language, acknowledging that it is sometimes fine to be fallible ourselves and to allow others to make mistakes. Write down three sentences using "should", "must" and "ought" that relate to negative thoughts that you have recently had about yourself or other people in a particular situation. Then re-write the sentences removing the judgmental words. More information about the use of CBT techniques by social workers can be found in our book (Grant and Kinman, 2014).

Preparing for reflective supervision

As discussed above, reflective supervision plays a key role in developing resilience and protecting wellbeing. Positive supervisory relationships are based on authenticity, respect and positive regard, and openness to learning and development. In such circumstances, transformational learning about oneself and one's practice can take place.

As a supervisee you are not a passive player in the supervisory relationship but an active one, and it is vital to prepare effectively. It is important to ensure that you have a supervision contract recognising that supervision should be a forum that not only focuses on administrative and managerial functions but is also developmental and supportive. View supervision as a joint process where you and your supervisor work together to facilitate reflection on issues affecting your practice, in order to develop your practice expertise. This means being prepared not only to discuss the concrete and managerial aspects of your work, but also to reflect on your practice itself and examine your strengths and weaknesses.

The beneficial effects of emotional writing have been highlighted earlier. There is evidence that writing about one's thoughts and feelings (even for only two minutes per day) can improve mental and physical health. Our research with social work students found that an emotional writing task helped increase emotional intelligence, reflective abilities and empathy and decrease psychological distress (Grant, Kinman and Alexander, 2014). This can be a useful technique to use in supervision.

Consider taking some time out to keep a reflective diary, exploring your emotional reactions to your experiences in practice and review this prior to supervision, making reflective notes on key themes that have emerged. For reflective supervision to be effective, social workers need to be open to feedback and be able to reflect on this for future practice. It is particularly important that you are able to share issues that have arisen in practice; notice when you have a tendency to justify, explain or defend yourself when receiving feedback and move to a position where you actively seek feedback to improve your capability.

> *It is also crucial to check that your decision making and assessments are based on best evidence, not prior assumptions or a biased perspective.*

This approach to supervision challenges the managerialist and bureaucratic agendas that have been inherent in some social workers' supervision. However, Munro's focus on supervision in her review of child protection and the supervision guidance produced by the Social Work Task Force clearly emphasise the importance of reflective supervision and its role in enhancing resilience, wellbeing and job performance.

Supervisees need to play their part in ensuring they receive good supervision by expecting it, preparing for it, and recognising what it feels like. More information on reflective supervision and how it can enhance resilience in social workers can be found in our book (Grant and Kinman, 2014).

Peer coaching for support

Peer coaching can build resilience and create opportunities for social workers to explore their experiences and enhance their reflective practice, self-awareness and problem-solving abilities. Peer coaching refers to a collaborative and reciprocal relationship with a colleague that aims to develop these skills and reflect on performance through feedback.

It is more than just a "buddy" relationship as coaching focuses on developing positive changes and working towards a goal by developing clear and realistic action plans. Developing a relationship with a peer coach can build resilience and enhance personal development and self-awareness by exploring personal strengths and other resources.

One productive technique that you can use with a peer coach is to adopt a solution-focused rather than a problem-focused approach to difficulties that you are encountering in your professional practice. The peer coach explores what you would like to change in your career or practice, and helps you make a step-by-step action plan to achieve this goal.

Another exercise is to use coaching sessions to identify "sparkling moments": times in your practice when you felt particularly successful and satisfied. By recalling these moments and their key features, opportunities for repeating such experiences can be explored. More information on developing peer coaching relationships for social workers can be found in our book (Grant and Kinman, 2014).
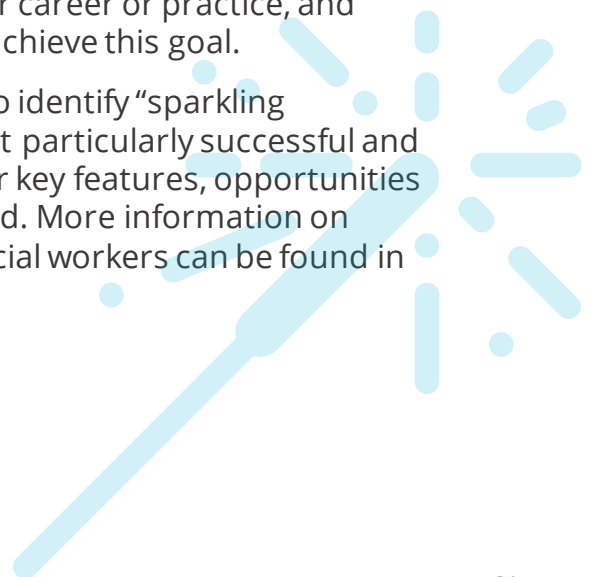
Self-awareness and action planning

Self-knowledge is a fundamental quality for social workers as it is a key component of all of the qualities that underpin resilience. Gaining insight into what we do (or don't do) that make things better or worse during stressful times is the first step in building resilience and enhancing wellbeing. By thinking about the ways in which you respond to stress, physically, psychologically and behaviourally, and the internal and external resources you possess to help you manage the stressors in your life, you can begin to make an action plan to improve your coping mechanisms and general emotional resilience.

Conclusion

Resilience is indeed ordinary magic. Although undoubtedly hard work, it is achievable if you have a supportive working environment and sufficient time, resources and professional development opportunities. We hope this guide will help you develop your personal resilience "toolkit" but acknowledge that it is by no means definitive. We are continuing to work in this area and insight into the interventions that can help social workers enhance their resilience is growing.

It is important to note that we are all different – what works for one person may not work for another. Building and maintaining resilience is an ongoing process and will be a challenge at times. We will all have days when we feel that we are not coping well and others where we feel we are getting nowhere fast, but there will be days when we feel strong, satisfied and resilient and ready to take on new challenges. What is important to remember is that developing your personal resilience toolbox will be personal; you may need to adapt and change your strategies over time and may need to seek external support from time to time if things get tough.

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Practitioners with a licence for Inform Children or Adults can access an online version of this guide, along with a self-diagnostic quiz by the authors so you can identify existing strengths and highlight competencies you could develop. The quiz can help you select specific 'tools' and tips described in this guide to focus on.

Guides to support talking about emotion in supervision, reflective practice, managing stress, compassion fatigue and providing supportive management and leadership are also available, along with guidance, learning tools and legal information and learning tools on a wide range of practice topics - see back page for some of these. Contact our helpdesk with any queries about licences: **Tel** 0203 915 9444; **email** ccinformhelpdesk@markallengroup.com.

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