PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

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Social work is at an important stage in its development. All professions must be responsive to changing social and economic conditions if they are to meet the needs of those they serve. This series focuses on sound practice and the specific contributions which social workers can make to the well-being of our society.

The British Association of Social Workers has always been conscious of its role in setting guidelines for practice and in seeking to raise professional standards. The conception of the Practical Social Work series arose from a survey of BASW members to discover where they, the practitioners in social work, felt there was the most need for new literature. The response was overwhelming and enthusiastic, and the result is a carefully planned, coherent series of books. The emphasis is firmly on practice set in a theoretical framework. The books will inform, stimulate and promote discussion, thus adding to the further development of skills and high professional standards. All the authors are practitioners and teachers of social work representing a wide variety of experience.

JO CAMPLING

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Dealing with Stress

**Neil Thompson
Michael Murphy
and
Steve Stradling**

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First published 1994 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-60005-4   ISBN 978-1-349-23302-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-23302-1

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Copy-edited and typeset by Povey-Edmondson
Okehampton and Rochdale, England

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Preface

Social work is widely recognised as an occupation strongly associated with pressure and stress. Dealing with the pain, distress and suffering brought about by crisis, loss, abuse, poverty, social problems and oppression, is bound to leave its mark on the worker. No one coming into social work with their eyes open can fail to see the difficulties and challenges inherent in this type of work. In addition to these inherent factors, we must also recognise, and take account of, a range of other pressures which, whilst not inevitable, are very much part of the modern social work scene. These include resource constraints, frequent and rapid change, unhelpful management practices and a disregard for the importance of supporting staff through the sometimes immense demands and complexities of their work.

This book has been written not as a guaranteed antidote to stress, but rather as a text that can offer guidance on how we can equip ourselves to deal as effectively as possible with the stresses we face in modern social work. The book is offered in a spirit of cautious optimism. We fully acknowledge the vast range of pressures practitioners and managers are required to cope with and how destructive these pressures can prove to be – for clients, workers and social work as a whole. However, counterbalanced against this, we also acknowledge the huge value of adopting a positive and assertive approach towards these pressures. This book is premised on our firm belief that there is much that can be done to maintain those pressures within manageable limits, to create a supportive and constructive atmosphere and to generate much needed feelings of job satisfaction and professional worth. We do not promise that this comes easy but we do believe that a defeatist attitude of pessimism is a barrier to positive outcomes for service users and a healthy and fulfilling work environment for service providers.

The guidance we offer here is based on the research, training and consultancy work undertaken by the Stress in Social Work Research Group since 1990. The book is a collaborative effort by three members of the group. Neil Thompson, a social work tutor with many years' experience of practice and management, has been the main author and co-ordinator of the project. Michael Murphy, an experienced child care practitioner and child protection training officer, has also made a significant contribution, including the majority of the 'Practice Focus' illustrations used at various points in the text. Steve Stradling is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Manchester and has acted as the 'anchor' for the project, providing advice and support relating to issues of statistical analysis and research methodology.

Stress is a major issue in social work and one which deserves far more detailed study and attention than it currently receives. We hope that this book can offer social work staff – both practitioners and managers – some informed guidance on how to deal with stress and related issues and, in the process, play at least a small part in achieving a higher profile for issues of stress and staff care.

NEIL THOMPSON

Acknowledgements

This book has been written by three members of the Stress in Social Work Research Group but credit must also be given to a fourth member of the group, Paul O'Neill, first, for his involvement in the research work which informs this book and, second, for the use of ideas and material drawn from his MSc dissertation on 'Stress in Social Work'.

We are grateful to Margaret Hodgkinson for doing such a good job of typing the manuscripts and, in addition, to Anne Paterson for her sterling administrative support throughout the project. We should also acknowledge our debt to the hundreds of social work staff who played a part in the development of this book by contributing to the research study to which we refer at various points in the text. We hope that they and their colleagues will benefit from the results.

NEIL THOMPSON

The author and publishers are grateful to McGraw-Hill Book Co, for permission to reproduce Figure 1.1, taken from Arroba and James (1987) *Pressure at Work: A Survival Guide*, and to Tony Morrison for permission to use Figure 7.1, which is based on his training materials.

Introduction

There are many books available which give advice and guidance on stress management techniques and how to 'look after yourself'. This, however, is not simply another book about coping with the effects of work and life pressures. This text is different in a number of ways:

1. Traditional approaches to stress adopt a narrow and individualistic perspective with little attention paid to the wider organisational, social and political factors involved. This text locates issues of stress firmly within the context of the way social work organisations function and the conflicting expectations society has of social workers.
2. This book is specifically related to social work concerns and addresses issues which relate directly to the management and practice of social work. Actual social work examples are used to illustrate many of the points raised.
3. Although this is primarily a practical book, it is not simply a prescriptive guide based just on 'common sense' or the personal experience of the authors. It is based on a clearly articulated theoretical framework of the complexities and intricacies of the workings of stress in social work. It is also based on empirical research carried out in three English local authority Social Services Departments (see below). The findings of this research project are used, along with a wide range of other research studies, to illustrate and support points covered in the text. In short, this is a practical book, but one grounded in theory and research.

Throughout this text we introduce findings from a study we conducted in 1990. Responses to an extensive questionnaire were obtained from 283 field social workers in three local

authority Social Services Departments in the north-west of England, and 49 residential social work staff in one of these authorities. As well as providing basic demographic details and information about their social work experience, the respondents completed a brief measure of anxiety and depression, rated the stressfulness of a range of social work tasks and features, indicated their preferred coping styles, the level and type of support they received from fellow workers, and the levels of satisfaction they obtained from various aspects of their role as social workers. (Further details of this study may be obtained from the authors.)

The book's title, *Dealing with Stress*, is particularly significant in so far as it is deliberately ambiguous. It refers to three separate processes:

- preventing the pressures we face from becoming harmful and destructive; that is, *avoiding* stress
- minimising and counteracting the harmful effects of stress when our attempts at prevention have broken down; that is, *coping with* stress
- readjusting after a prolonged or heavy period of stress or a particularly traumatic and stressful event; that is, *recovering from* stress

Social work as an occupation is characterised by a wide range of pressures and dilemmas, involving emotional demands, potential conflicts and threats or even actual violence. In addition, there is frequent exposure to the pain, suffering and distress of others, the full weight of the human condition. All this needs to be seen in the context of resource constraints, legal requirements, organisational pressures and media attention. Given this scenario, it is not surprising that social work and social care are often experienced as stressful.

A major aim of this book, therefore, is to cast light on the potential sources of stress for social work staff and the development of appropriate strategies (at both the level of the individual and the organisation) for coping with stress and for preventing stress in the first place.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the costs of stress and thereby emphasises why it is

important to devote our attention to these issues. Chapter 2 outlines a theory base which will act as a foundation for our approach to dealing with stress. A three-dimensional model of stress is presented and the applicability of this to social work is considered. The main focus, in this chapter, is on 'stressors', the sources of pressure which can give rise to stress. This chapter outlines the theoretical distinction between pressure, which can be positive or negative, depending on the context in which it is experienced, and stress, which is always harmful and destructive. We seek to enable social work staff to distinguish between the two and thus be in a position to use pressure constructively and positively but without allowing it to 'overspill' and become stress.

Chapter 3 addresses the personal, psychological aspects of stress and stress-management. In particular, it considers the variety of coping methods available to us. Chapter 4 builds on this by exploring some of the wider social issues – in particular, race and gender – that influence the experience of stress in social work. This chapter relates stress to issues of equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice. It shows how traditional approaches to stress which focus on the individual run the risk of neglecting vitally important aspects of the situation such as the oppressive effects of racism and sexism.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the wider context of stress in social work. They develop a discussion of the potentially stressful factors which are intrinsic to social work; that is, those which are an inherent part of the social work task, for example, the care versus control dilemma. Chapter 5 considers ways in which these stressors can be minimised and how our attitude towards them is a significant factor in determining whether or not they are experienced as stressful.

Chapter 6 follows a similar path, but concentrates instead on those pressures which are extrinsic to social work; that is, factors which can, in theory at least, be avoided or eliminated, for example, a lack of supervision or training. The focus here is on the organisational context of social work, and is therefore of particular relevance to managers and policy makers, as well as basic grade practitioners.

Chapter 7 focuses on the steps that can be taken to:

- prevent pressure overspilling into stress
- cope with stress when it does arise
- deal with the aftermath of particularly stressful or traumatic incidents or periods

It concentrates on adopting a pragmatic and effective way of dealing with stress issues. In particular, it argues the case for organisations developing clear and realistic staff care policies.

Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter. It attempts to draw together the main strands of the arguments and summarises our approach to dealing with stress. It seeks to bring together the diverse themes which recur throughout the book in order to leave the reader with an overall view of dealing with stress in social work – an overview which will, we hope, help to equip staff to deal as effectively as possible with the multitude of pressures they face.

The book has been written with a wide audience in mind. We hope it will be of direct relevance to practitioners in all aspects of social work – field, residential, day care and so on. We also feel this is a book for managers, partly in terms of managing their own pressures and stresses, but also in terms of fulfilling their duty of supporting their staff in coping with the particular pressures they encounter in their practice. In a sense, then, this book is doubly important for managers and supervisors.

This book will not provide you with everything you need to deal with the stresses of modern social work – no book can do that. What it will do, we very much hope, is give you a knowledge base, a theoretical framework for extending that knowledge base and some of the skills and strategies you need to give of your best without doing harm to your own health or well-being. In particular, we hope it will give you – individually and collectively – the confidence and determination to succeed in this task.