# Introduction

## Self-Care in Social Work

*A Guide for Practitioners, Supervisors, and Administrators*

Many social workers enter the profession because they have a desire to help others in need and contribute to the betterment of society. They are drawn to a line of work wherein they can assist individuals, groups, families, and communities to surmount the hardships and challenges that life brings. New to their craft, these budding professionals are fully prepared to use their hard-earned knowledge and to hone their skills to attain the rewards that are promised by a people-oriented practice. What comes as a surprise to some, however, is the huge toll that the work takes on social workers' emotional well-being, physical health, and interpersonal functioning over the course of their, sometimes short, careers.

Leaders in the field of social work are now calling attention to the sometimes serious consequences of work-related stress on individuals and the systems in which they are employed. Figley (1995) coined the term *compassion fatigue,* in referring to a set of physical and psychological symptoms appearing in social workers who are exposed to client suffering that occurs as a result of traumatizing events such as physical or sexual abuse, combat, domestic violence, or the suicide or unexpected death of a loved one. Psychological symptoms of this type of secondary traumatic stress include depression, anxiety, fear, rage, shame, emotional numbing, cynicism, suspiciousness, poor self-esteem, and intrusive thoughts or avoidance of reminders about client trauma. Physiological symptoms, including hypertension, sleep disruption, and immune system malfunctions, have been found to result in serious illness and a relatively high mortality rate in helping professionals (Beaton & Murphy, 1995). Similarly, *burnout* has been defined as a process involving gradually increasing emotional exhaustion in workers, along with a negative attitude toward clients and reduced commitment to the profession (Maslach, 1993). It is thought to be associated with a work environment that makes high demands on employees but offers limited supports and rewards. Both worker burnout and secondary traumatic stress have been implicated in high rates of turnover in social work organizations (Pryce, Shakelford, & Pryce, 2007). Another occupational hazard in the field of social work is referred to as *vicarious trauma*—a transformation of the professional helper's worldview as a result of "empathic engagement with survivor clients and their trauma material" (Sakvitne & Pearlman, 1996, p. 17). Because social workers are routinely exposed to client suffering and trauma, they may be vulnerable to shifts in their fundamental assumptions concerning safety, trust, control and benevolence in the world.

In response to these threats to the stability of social workers and the human service agencies in which they are employed, administrators may offer training seminars that provide education on the signs and symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. Coursework on this topic is also increasingly common in university curricula at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. These advances have built awareness of psychological risks within the profession, but they have offered limited assistance to social work interns and practitioners who are striving to resolve work-related distress and trauma. Training participants are often encouraged to practice "self-care," yet they are provided minimal guidance in conceptualizing this crucial process that promises both self-preservation and professional goal attainment. Moreover, suggestions offered for promoting personal care are often found to be of limited use or effectiveness. For instance, workers under mounting stress might be advised to "take breaks" from case-related or administrative tasks during their assigned shifts. After doing so, they might find that they are farther behind and feeling buried under unfulfilled duties and unmet expectations. Or distressed workers attempting to follow the recommendation to relax at home might find that instead of "leaving work behind" they are ruminating about mistakes made on the job and unaddressed

client needs. They may also be checking e-mail from home, noting what is not getting done, and thus increasing their stress. Even more discouraging, the employee who accesses a therapist from his or her agency's employee assistance program may discover that the clinician has no understanding of these particular work-related issues.

This book offers an alternative to social work practitioners and interns seeking to understand the essential elements of self-care. It suggests a new way of thinking about how they can help themselves to function optimally on the job. In conceptualizing the process of self-care, we emphasize the importance of three "S"s: self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. In addition to this microsystem focus on personal strategies for self-care, we incorporate a macrosystem perspective that recognizes organizational sources of stress and constructive coping. Because of this wide frame of reference, the intended audience of this book is quite broad and includes social work students, practitioners, supervisors, and administrators. In addition to serving as a guide for practicing social workers, this book is structured so that it may be used as a text for undergraduate and graduate social work practice and practicum courses and courses dedicated to understanding and reducing stress and improving self-care.

In presenting our views of self-care, we draw from the literature, statements made by participants in workshops and focus groups, and stories submitted by students and social workers about their experiences with work-related stress and strategies for coping. To facilitate the integration of material presented, we provide activities and examples, discussion questions, and chapter exercises. We encourage readers to take the time to read the *From the Field* stories and to carefully consider the questions posed in the sections titled "Reader Reflections." Discussion questions and exercises at the end of each chapter can be used in classes or workshop training sessions to help students and workers delve more deeply into the concepts discussed. We also invite readers to visit our Web site at www.selfcareinsocialwork.com, download worksheets and other activities and tools, and share their own experiences as they relate to the stress and coping in social work.

Part I of this book is aimed at conceptualizing the stress and coping process. Chapter 1 examines the effects of stress on our physiological, emotional, and behavioral functioning. It also highlights the importance of recognizing both personal and organizational sources of stress. Consistent with this dual focus, we assert that responsibility for the management of workplace stress lies both with the individual employee and the agency's management team or administration. Chapter 2 focuses on the ways in which the concept of self- care has evolved in recent years. We describe various commonly proposed strategies for self-care strategies, including those falling into the general categories of lifestyle or workplace adjustments.

Part II of the book delves into the three "S"s: self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. Chapter 3 seeks to help readers become more aware of signs of stress, emotional reactions, and thinking patterns as they relate to social work. Particular emphasis is placed on situational meaning that may be derived from work-related experiences, including thoughts concerning client, self-, and system limitations. Chapter 4 is devoted to assisting social workers striving to regulate their emotions in response to clients who are needy, demanding, hostile, or distraught. The cognitive reframe is introduced as a valuable tool that reorients our perceptions of problematic events so that they are seen in a more positive light. In addition, the practice of mindfulness is discussed as a method of self-soothing for workers who are fatigued or "soul sick" as a result of empathic engagement with clients. This chapter also stresses the value of balance in the helping professions. It references an ancient Hindu myth ("Shiva's Circle") to illustrate the importance of balance between empathy toward others and a need to stand apart from their pain. Chapter 5 highlights threats to self-efficacy that are common in social work when client progress is painfully slow or nonexistent. It offers strategies for maintaining self-confidence and a sense of competence amid client resistance to change and slow systems change. For instance, we encourage workers to notice and celebrate small steps toward client success and system

transformation. We also emphasize the importance of adapting case-based and professional goals so that they are realistic and achievable.

Part III of the book focuses on organizational issues as they relate to self-care. Chapter 6 aids readers in assessing their level of fit with their organization's culture as it concerns hierarchy, individualism, importance of relationships, directness of communication, time perspective, and information processing. It also suggests practical steps that can be taken to improve congruence between the individual's approach to managing work-related responsibilities and those favored by his or her organization. Chapter 7 stresses the importance of high-quality supervision in supporting the self-care of workers and in counteracting contagion, or the spread of traumatic stress within the agency. It also addresses stressors commonly experienced by supervisors. Finally, chapter 8 identifies structural steps that social work agencies can take to reduce employee stress and promote workplace wellness. In that chapter, we make a case for the devotion of organizational resources to the self-care of human service workers. We show how this results in benefits for both individual employees and the organization as a whole. Furthermore, we maintain that the future of the social work profession depends on the maintenance of a vibrant, healthy, and well-functioning workforce.