Supporting social workers in 2021

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We provide critical information in a quick and accessible format to help social work professionals make and evidence their decisions. Here are just a few reasons why your peers find Community Care Inform such an invaluable tool:

> " It's easily readable without too much jargon, it gives evidence that I can look up, which is backed up by credible information."

Social Care Assessor

> " I always find what I'm looking for, it's well written, I can put it in reports for parents."

Social Worker (Children)

> " I use the knowledge to inform my staff during supervision."

Service Manager (Children)

> " It's easy to use, great clear information. I can print and take it with me. Very helpful in planning and responding to needs."

Family Support Worker

> " It is great for sharing in a group discussion, it helps in my challenging cases. And for court evidence. It gives me solid evidence."

Family Support Worker

> " It's very helpful in providing research-based information and legislation updates, it's easy to use."

Head of Department

> " I listened to a podcast regarding self-neglect which helped me to understand issues regarding this and what I can do for my client."

Social Worker

> " I use it for everything, I love the enormous amounts of research. It's my bible."

Team Leader (Children)

> " Helps me to understand best practice, gives examples on case scenarios. Sets out restorative practice."

Senior Social Worker (Children)

> " Articles and research are very good for difficult cases and I find that I can refer to it and find relevant information. Also great for CPD."

Advanced Practitioner

> " It provides us with lots of recent research and practice tips. Good for keeping staff in the loop."

Service Manager (Children)

> " It's not just my opinion but backed up by independent research."

Social Worker

Want to find out more?

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Introduction

As a society we are living through difficult times. Social workers across the UK have responded with extraordinary effort and dedication to the ongoing impact of Covid-19. But many of you are reporting worsening mental health as a result. As well as rising caseloads, new ways of working are impacting on you and the people you work with.

Managing your workplace stress, fear and threat are primarily the responsibility of your employer who has a clear responsibility to safeguard your welfare at work. You have a right to expect this from your employer. However, as an additional support, UNISON and Community Care have produced this practical interactive guide to support you in maintaining your health and wellbeing. You can download and print the guide or save the link for any time you need it.

It contains practical tips and exercises and includes links to additional content you may find useful. This digital guide is exclusive to UNISON members working in all social work settings.

For any further help or information at any time you can contact our helpline UNISONdirect on 0800 0 857857.

Jon Richards
National secretary
UNISON

Camilla Pemberton
Head of content
Community Care Inform

The content in this magazine has been carefully selected to support social workers in 2021 (and beyond), recognising some of the professional and personal challenges that practitioners may face. The articles are all extracts from specialist expert-written guides published by Community Care Inform, the multi award-winning information source for social workers and social care professionals.

We have added links to the full versions of these guides, most of which have been made freely available to all social workers. Where you do not have access, you may be trying to view content that is available to Community Care Inform subscribers only. If you do not have access, and would like to discuss licence options, please email ccinformhelpdesk@markallengroup.com or call 0203 915 9444.

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CONTENTS

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GET ORGANISED

Social work is a tough job so social workers need to get organised!

Being in UNISON means strength in numbers. The chances are that any problem affecting you is affecting colleagues too, so don't suffer alone.

Encourage everyone in your team to join the union.

If you haven't got a UNISON steward or contact for your workplace — elect one.

Your UNISON branch will provide all the training and back up they need.

Online practice and communication

We know many social workers are working from home at the moment, either part time or full time. They are communicating virtually, both with colleagues and service users, and using multiple communication tools, some of which may be unfamiliar. While employers must ensure that their social workers are well supported, we are aware of practitioners who are struggling to navigate these new ways of working and communicating. The following article is an extract from the Community Care Inform guide, Online practice and communication: boundaries, ethics and safety, which provides helpful tips and advice.

With an increasing proportion of contact with service users taking place virtually – and online identity and communication becoming an integral part of many professionals' lives – it is vital we continually reflect on our use of technology, particularly as its role and functions develop.

Here are some key tips to help social workers practice ethically and safely when using digital communication tools to conduct visits and maintain contact with service users.

• Be mindful and purposeful when choosing a platform
Each social media and communication platform offers its own functionalities, privacy settings and limitations. Consider in each situation if the platform you are using is appropriate for your needs and compatible with your professional identity. For example, on WhatsApp your contacts will see your phone number, while on other messaging platforms, such as Skype, your number can be hidden.

Different platforms imply different levels of intimacy and urgency. For example, a text is considered more intimate and more urgent than an email. Therefore, be mindful of the circumstances in which you would choose a letter, email, video call, phone, text, or direct message to communicate with service users.

• **Manage expectations and boundaries**
Digital tools and social media offer 24/7 communication; this can generate unbounded expectations about professionals' availability. If you communicate with people who access services via a messaging app, for example, it is important to be clear about what they can and cannot expect – such as at what times of day you will be accessing messages, how long it may take to reply, what other communication routes they should use in an emergency and so on. Similarly, maintaining appropriate boundaries goes beyond being mindful about the content of your own messages or posts to thinking about the medium, timing and context. For example, contacting a service user or sending work communications after office hours or during weekends or holidays may result in potential infringement of private boundaries. Of course, in some circumstances, such as an emergency or duty shift, it may be appropriate.

• **Connection or communication?**
Some apps and tools allow us to generate a one-time link (for example, think of a Zoom or MS Teams meeting) to communicate with a person or people, whether or not they are in our contacts or 'friends' list. This enables communication without the type of continuous online connection that is established when we 'friend' or 'follow' others. This is an important distinction; reciprocal exposure of online activities between practitioners and service users has significant implications. Seeing the online activities of people who access services may be helpful in providing support and safeguarding, but their communications and postings may also engage our statutory and safeguarding responsibilities. You cannot unsee what you've seen so it's important to carefully consider potential consequences when establishing online connections vs one-off communications.

• **Understand 'digilanguage'**
In face-to-face encounters we use body language, facial expression and other cues to communicate our meaning and interpret what others are saying. We could discuss the same issue but have very different experiences if we have a video call, and different again if we speak on the phone/voice call, or by text. The reduction in social and non-verbal cues in digital communication can increase disinhibition and diminish emotional connection and empathy, as well as creating more potential for misunderstanding and ambiguity. We therefore need to be very alert to the alternative cues embedded in digital interactions. For example, what might a child or adult interpret from seeing that you are

> "The reduction in social and non-verbal cues in digital communication can increase disinhibition and diminish emotional connection and empathy, as well as creating more potential for misunderstanding and ambiguity."

> "Even if your account is private, your postings might be copied or reposted and become visible to a larger audience so consider what type of personal information you may be sharing and why, and if there is conflict between your personal and professional identities online."

'online' or have read their message but have not responded? What may be the impact if they see you are 'typing' but (perhaps because you are called away) do not then send a message? In some situations, it may be helpful to write your message outside of the platform.

Consider what emojis, use or not of video, or muting might mean to service users. For example, during supervised contact/family time online, some young people have asked their social worker to turn off their video so they can still observe the video call between the young person and their family, but the worker isn't seen. Young people said this offered a greater sense of privacy and made them feel more relaxed.

• **Consider your own online presence**
If you have social media accounts, post in a way that can stand public scrutiny. Even if your account is private, your postings might be copied or reposted and become visible to a larger audience so consider what type of personal information you may be sharing and why, and if there is conflict between your personal and professional identities online.

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UNISON SAYS

Your employer is responsible for your health and safety. They should ensure that you have the correct equipment to do your job, that your workload is at a safe level and you're not put under unreasonable stress. They should provide clear guidance and training on virtual working and suitable electronic communications for you to do your job. Your employer may have a policy on which communication platforms are acceptable and secure for you to use.

Social workers have faced allegations of inappropriate use of social media from their employer and regulator even when they believed it was through private messaging or groups. A regulator will also consider the impact of professional boundaries in relation to communication with members of the public involved in social services so tread carefully, when considering your online presence.

UNISON actively discourages our members from accepting friend requests from service users, no matter how sincere. This is not just about professional boundaries. We believe it exposes social workers to too much risk. This also applies to family members of the service user.

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For more information on this issue, and all references, please see our full guide by Peter Buzzi on Community Care Inform.

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Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue

Social work is a challenging career, exposing many practitioners to trauma and distress on a regular basis. Exposure to another's trauma can cause secondary trauma, which is a risk for anyone working in the helping professions. The following article is an extract from the Community Care Inform guide, Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. It provides information, advice and tips to help social workers, and their employers, to understand and manage the impact of secondary trauma.

Secondary trauma (also known as vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue) describes the sense of hurt that those who are close to a victim of trauma may feel. Secondary trauma occurs when a 'helper' is exposed to extreme events directly experienced by another and becomes overwhelmed by the exposure to trauma (Figley, 1995). People who work with trauma victims are at risk of internalising their trauma, called secondary traumatic stress.

Secondary trauma is not a sign of weakness. It is an occupational hazard for helping professionals, and organisations must acknowledge this impact on their staff.

Providing education, support, and a safe working environment will support staff to work more effectively, provide better support and services for service users, enabling more effective/positive outcomes and overall strengthening the organisation.

Risk factors

• Length of service: social workers who are new to the profession may not have developed effective means to deal with the trauma they are seeing or hearing at work. Conversely, very experienced social workers are at significant risk because of the accumulation of trauma.

• Avoidance: secondary trauma may be more problematic for people who tend to avoid problems or difficult feelings, blame others for their difficulties, or withdraw.

• Support: a poor social support network.

Dr Bruce Perry at the Child Trauma Academy notes the following additional risk factors for secondary trauma:

• Empathy
• Insufficient recovery time
• Unresolved personal trauma
• Isolation and systemic fragmentation
• Lack of systemic resources

The impact of secondary trauma

Social workers may also experience trauma first-hand (in the form of threats, assault, racist or homophobic attitudes and so on). When coupled with exposure to secondary trauma, these experiences can severely limit professional capacity and judgment, in addition to having a profound effect on the worker personally.

The impact on you as a person

Cognitive
- Diminished concentration
- Confusion
- Spaciness
- Loss of meaning
- Decreased self-esteem
- Preoccupation with trauma
- Trauma imagery
- Apathy
- Rigidity
- Disorientation
- Whirling thoughts
- Thoughts of self-harm or harm toward others
- Self-doubt
- Perfectionism
- Minimisation

Emotional
- Anxiety
- Powerlessness
- Guilt
- Survivor guilt
- Shutdown
- Numbness
- Fear
- Helplessness
- Sadness
- Depression
- Hypersensitivity
- Emotional roller coaster
- Overwhelmed
- Depleted

Behavioural
- Impatient
- Clingy
- Irritable
- Withdrawn
- Moody
- Regression
- Sleep disturbances
- Appetite changes
- Nightmares
- Hypervigilance
- Elevated startle response
- Use of negative coping (smoking, alcohol, drug misuse)
- Accident proneness
- Losing things
- Self-harm behaviours

Interpersonal
- Withdrawn
- Decreased interest in intimacy or sex
- Mistrust
- Isolation from friends
- Loneliness

- Impact on parenting (protectiveness, concern about aggression)
- Projection of anger or blame
- Intolerance

Physical
- Shock
- Sweating
- Rapid heartbeat
- Breathing difficulties
- Somatic reactions
- Aches and pains
- Dizziness
- Impaired immune system

The impact on you as a professional

Job performance
- Decrease in quality or quantity
- Low motivation
- Avoidance of tasks
- Increase in mistakes
- Setting perfectionist standards
- Obsession about detail

Morale
- Decrease in confidence
- Loss of interest
- Dissatisfaction
- Negative attitude
- Apathy
- Demoralisation
- Lack of appreciation
- Detachment
- Feelings of incompleteness

Interpersonal
- Withdrawal from colleagues
- Impatience
- Decrease in quality of relationships
- Poor communication
- Subsume own needs
- Staff conflicts

Behavioural
- Absenteeism
- Exhaustion
- Faulty judgment
- Irritability
- Tardiness
- Irresponsibility
- Overwork
- Frequent job changes

Impact on the organisation

Secondary trauma has an immense impact on organisations. Workers experiencing secondary trauma tend to have higher levels of absenteeism, including long-term sick leave for issues including depression and anxiety. Many social workers move to teams considered less stressful or may move out of social work completely, resulting in team and organisational instability, high-cost temporary staff and recruitment costs. These issues affect individual and team functioning, making it difficult for the organisation to provide a safe and effective service.

Impact on service users

A social worker experiencing secondary trauma may be less effective in their assessment, or in danger of making poor assessments and dangerous decisions, putting people at risk. Service users will feel the impact of late appointments, cancelled or forgotten visits, half-hearted attempts and practitioners who don't seem to care. Longer term, they feel the impact of high staff turnover, with a parade of professionals to whom they must repeat their story.

Reducing the impact of secondary trauma

Personal self-care

Good self-care will not prevent secondary trauma. However, it will enable the practitioner to be in a stronger mental and physical state to cope with their experiences.

Physical
- Get an adequate amount of sleep
- Eat regularly and healthily
- Exercise regularly
- Take time off
- Seek medical attention when needed
- Take holidays and minibreaks (where possible)
- Be aware of distractions becoming inappropriate coping strategies

Psychological
- Make time for self-reflection
- Engage in counselling or therapy
- Write in a journal
- Decrease stress in your life
- Listen to your thoughts, judgments, and beliefs
- Learn how to say no

Emotional
- Give yourself affirmations
- Identify comforting people, activities, and places and engage with them
- Allow yourself to express emotions
- Avoid self-denial

Professional
- Take a break during your work day
- Get to know your colleagues and develop supportive relationships
- Use supervision (and demand it)
- Set limits/boundaries with colleagues and clients
- Develop rituals at work that promote camaraderie and support
- Develop end of the day rituals that help you close your work day

Spiritual
- Reflect on things, people, ideas that are important to you
- Try not to be 'in charge' or the expert all the time
- Find a spiritual connection or community
- Pray or meditate
- Enjoy nature
- Contribute to causes you believe in

Team self-care
- A positive and supportive team is an effective safety net in a very difficult profession. The impact of having colleagues who know you and can 'read' where you are and provide support and encouragement cannot be underestimated.

- Celebrate! Celebrate success, birthdays, Fridays – anything that can bring a positive atmosphere to your team.

- Make effective use of team meetings – it's one chance for everyone to be together to learn something new, support each other, and come up with creative solutions.

- Socialise outside work (bear in mind some team members may find this a challenge).

- Develop team rituals that help develop team cohesion and support.

- Develop ideas that could have a positive impact on work (for example educate service users on a topic that may result in reduced referral rates; share your expertise in an area with your team).

- Create an environment which does not allow for gossip and cliques.

- Create a positive physical environment (either at home or in an office).

How organisations and managers can help reduce the impact of secondary trauma
- Provide effective support and supervision. Supervision must be case reflective but also allow time and a non-judgmental space for workers to share the impact their work has on them.

- Develop an organisational culture that is one of learning, not blame.

- Look for ways to build diversity and job enrichment into the work. Vary workers' caseloads, and provide opportunities to do non-casework, such as participating in panels, facilitating training, or mentoring.

- Develop a culture where it is okay to express feelings about the impact of the work and where self-care is encouraged.

- Provide critical debriefing after an especially traumatic incident. Remember that it may not be the incident itself that causes the trauma for the practitioner, it may be an accumulation of traumatic events or the personal situation of that worker. Workers who were not directly involved may also feel the impact of the traumatic event in different ways.

- Educate and support staff and managers around secondary trauma and provide a safe space for discussion and support.

- Provide visible, approachable leadership.

- Promote a 'we're in this together' attitude, especially when things go wrong.

- Ensure social workers' emotional and physical safety are considered as a top priority and processes are in place to provide support, especially with regards to working from home.

- Provide adequate salaries and time off.

- Ensure your staff know where they can obtain extra support (such as occupational health, employee assistance programmes).

- Provide sufficient induction, professional training, and management supervision for staff to feel competent and supported in their jobs.

- Encourage communication and staff contributions.

- Develop mentoring or peer mentoring schemes.

- Provide information to help staff understand how and why decisions about resource allocations, deadlines, policies, and assignments are made – help them see 'the big picture'.

Increase your compassion satisfaction

Compassion satisfaction is the contentment one experiences from being a helper. Despite the challenges of social work, practitioners often say their career is extremely rewarding. Although social workers bear witness to pain and trauma, they also bear witness to resilience and healing and the potential for changed lives. It is those experiences that workers must keep in the forefront of their minds to help them remain passionate and protected in their work.

The way an individual thinks about their work can reduce the impact of compassion fatigue. The Huntington Institute refers to this as "working protectively". As part of working protectively, in professional reflection, social workers should consider:

1. Why do you do this work? Has the reason changed from when you started? Have you lost your motivation? Can you become re-inspired in your current role?

2. What aspects of your work give you the most pleasure, satisfaction, or sense of achievement? Can you increase those areas?

3. Do you know what you are doing in your work and why? Do you see 'the big picture' and your role in it for service users, the organisation, and the larger community?

4. How do you measure success at work? Do you need to reconsider how you measure it? While you might have an ultimate vision of success, is it a realistic one? Reframing success into bite-sized chunks is more realistic, and provides more opportunity for success and celebration.

5. What aspects of your work can you control? Determine what things are within your power to change and be creative. Rethink how you can manage those things that cannot be changed.

6. What are the personal costs and rewards of doing this work? How can you increase the rewards? Are the personal costs too great?

> "Although social workers bear witness to pain and trauma, they also bear witness to resilience and healing and the potential for changed lives."

For more information on this issue, and all references, please see our full guide by Lori Goosen on Community Care Inform.

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Managing fear in social work

Social work has a proud tradition of striving for empowerment for some of the most disadvantaged and oppressed people in society. But this often involves working at the sharp end of society's fears and anxieties, supporting people who may be overwhelmed by emotions and distress. This can lead to frightening situations. The following article is an extract from the Community Care Inform guide, Managing fear in social work, which contains helpful tips and exercises.

Dealing with frightening situations

Social workers as an occupational group experience one of the highest victimisation levels of threats, harassment and violence, according to figures published by the Health and Safety Executive in 2019. We often need to work with people who have learnt to use aggression, violence and harassment as ways of controlling others and their environment. Or who, because of mental health problems or conditions such as dementia, react in a hostile or intimidating way to our involvement.

While empathy for why an individual may behave aggressively is intrinsic to our social work values, we have a right to be safe at work. The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 places a duty on employers to ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of their employees when at work. Case law has clarified that employers' duty of care extends to both physical and psychiatric harm. Your organisation needs to support you, in reducing the risk of potentially violent incidents, so that fear about possible, ongoing or previous aggression or harassment does not damage your mental health.

UNISON SAYS

Employers are responsible for supporting and making staff safe, including when necessary and appropriate, seeking injunctions and criminal prosecutions when threats are made, or violence is experienced and making alternative working and personal arrangements for staff.

UNISON supports our members in ensuring protection and safety measures are in place and representing members if a complaint is made to their professional regulator. UNISON's legal scheme may also offer support to members where, for example, they suffer personal injury from violence at work, such as a work-related assault.

Tips for individual workers

- If you have concerns in advance of meeting a particular individual or family, talk through the situation and possible risks with a supervisor or peer. If in doubt, never go alone, especially if no risk assessment has been undertaken.

- Make sure others are aware of your whereabouts and organise back-up. Take a colleague with you to wait outside the door (which may be left open) or arrange for someone to call you after a certain time if you have not made contact. Discuss what colleagues will do to help in different scenarios.

- Check that lone worker policies and tools are in place and make use of them – you should be provided with a personal safety alarm and/or an app on your phone.

The role of supervisors

- Ensure there are clear and transparent plans to support staff safety and wellbeing in situations of actual or potential violence or harassment.

- After an incident, a worker may need support for the rest of the day, week, and potentially beyond. They should not be expected just to carry on as normal. Do they need help in thinking about getting home or deciding what they should do tomorrow?

- Anticipate the potential for further aggression: what limits and boundaries need to be set with the service user? Support the

worker in deciding whether they carry on working with the person, and if so under what conditions.

Harassment and the law

Unsurprisingly, research (Littlechild 2005, 2016) has found that personalised threats, such as being told someone knows where you live or where your children go to school, often create the most extreme levels of anxiety, compared with other fear-inducing situations. Social workers have experienced, for example, parents waiting in the office car park for them, making serial unfounded complaints and posting malicious information about them and/or their family members on social media.

Employers' duties under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 mean that failure to deal with, and take reasonable steps, to prevent harassment and stalking could be unlawful.

> "Social workers as an occupational group experience one of the highest victimisation levels of threats, harassment and violence, according to figures published by the Health and Safety Executive in 2019."

For more information on this issue, and all references, please see our full guide by Brian Littlechild on Community Care Inform.

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Stress management

There is no doubt that 2020 caused unprecedented levels of stress and challenge for social workers, many of whom were already managing dangerously high caseloads. Effective stress management is essential to avoid exhaustion – which can lead to burnout – and both managers and organisations have a duty to support and protect their social workers. The following article is an extract from the Community Care Inform guide, Stress management: a manager's guide. It is intended for managers, but there are tips and exercises that social workers at all levels may find useful. At the end of the article you will find UNISON's tips for managing stress, which have been written for social workers at any stage of their career.

Work-related stress is on the rise, according to figures published by the Health and Safety Executive in 2019-20, with the social work sector recording one of the highest levels.

Some understandings and definitions of stress appear to suggest it's the individual's inability to cope under pressure, which can, unfortunately, then be perceived as a lack of emotional strength or mental fortitude. So, a good starting point in learning how to manage stress is for managers and teams to identify their attitude towards stress and consider whether it's a barrier or aid to managing the problem. The exercise below can be done either individually or with a team.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them". Adverse reactions include emotional (moodiness, anger, feeling overwhelmed, depression); cognitive (indecisiveness, inability to concentrate, worry, fear); physical (headaches, muscle tension, high blood pressure, frequent minor illnesses); and behavioural (sleep/eating disorders, increased use of alcohol/smoking).

Six key areas

HSE's management standards cover six key areas of work design which, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and wellbeing, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. In other words, they cover the primary sources of stress at work: demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.

1. Demands

The standard:
- Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening:
- The organisation provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work.
- Skills and abilities are matched to the job demands.
- Jobs are designed to be within people's capabilities.
- Employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

2. Control

The standard:
- Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening:
- Where possible, employees have control over their pace of work and are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging tasks.
- Employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative.
- Employees have a say over when breaks can be taken.
- Employees are consulted over their work patterns.

3. Support

The standard:
- Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening:
- The organisation has policies and procedures to adequately support employees.
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff; and for employees to support peers.
- Employees know what support is available, how and when to access it, as well as the resources to do their job.
- Employees receive regular and constructive feedback.

4. Relationships

The standard:
- Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours e.g. bullying.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening:
- The organisation promotes positive behaviours to avoid conflict and ensure fairness.
- The organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour.

- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour; and so that employees can report unacceptable behaviour.

5. Role

The standard:
- Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening:
- The organisation ensures that the different requirements it places on employees are compatible and clear.
- The organisation provides information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities.
- Systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role.

6. Change

The standard:
- Employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening:
- The organisation provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes.
- The organisation ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals.
- Employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs and, if necessary, are given training to support any changes.
- Employees are aware of timetables for changes and have access to relevant support.

> "HSE's management standards cover six key areas of work design which, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and wellbeing, lower productivity and increased sickness absence."

EXERCISE

In supervision or with your team discuss:
- What needs to be done to ensure the demands placed on staff are not excessive?
- What needs to be done to ensure that skills and abilities are matched to enable the job to be done?
- What concerns about the work environment do staff have and how may these be addressed?

Impact of workplace culture on managing stress

High levels of stress will be found:

- in staff who feel unsupported;

- in situations where there are excessive demands, such as high caseloads comprised of complex and difficult situations;

- where staff feel pressurised in completing work;

- where people fear making mistakes.

A healthy organisational culture is one where: open and honest communication exists at all levels; where staff feel encouraged, enabled and supported to deal with the complex situations they often face; where mistakes are understood, a blame culture is not allowed to flourish and where mutual respect is established.

Managers can achieve this by:

1. Encouraging staff e.g. by praising a job well done and using constructive, not destructive, criticism.

2. Establishing systems of good communication between employees and management.

3. Taking work-related stress seriously and responding proactively and positively to concerns raised.

4. Ensuring staff consultation is a dynamic within the organisation.

5. Supporting staff via supervision, team meetings, induction and training.

6. Providing appropriate and adequate resources for the work.

7. Recognising problems early and intervening appropriately for a speedy resolution.

8. Discouraging staff from working long hours; encouraging staff to take annual leave/entitlements.

Risk assessment for stress

1. Identify the stressor e.g. proposed increases to workload as vacancy not being filled.

2. Who may be harmed and how?

3. Which of the stressors apply? (demands/control/support/relationships/role/change)

4. Level of concern (high, medium or low). Any 'high' situations should attract immediate attention.

5. What needs doing? Make a list of reasonably practicable measures e.g. training, precautions taken, information provided, instructions given. Outline action plans, who will do what and within what timeframe.

6. What else is required?

Workplace bullying

Workplace bullying is one of the greatest sources of stress that employees can endure, although organisations and managers are often slow to react because it is not always accepted as a credible label for the kind of abuse that employees face in the workplace. Understandings of bullying vary and there is no standard definition (although the related concept of harassment has a legal definition and protections in the Equality Act 2010 and other legislation).

Acas, the organisation that supports employers and employees to resolve workplace problems, defines bullying as "offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient" (2014).

As a manager, there are a number of strategies for managing workplace bullying:

- Openly discuss the topic.

- Actively promote a working environment where bullying is less likely to flourish, an environment where staff feel empowered to challenge bullying.

- Gather information.

- Raise awareness of your organisation's policy on the issue.

- Take immediate action by dealing with situations at a low level before they escalate.

- Look at Bullyonline.org, a website containing information on workplace bullying.

EXERCISE
- Discuss what forms bullying can take.
- Discuss what can be done to manage a bullying colleague or manager?

For more information on this issue, and all references, see our full guide by Ray Braithwaite on Community Care Inform.

CommunityCare **inform**Adults   CommunityCare **inform**Children

UNISON SAYS

It is your organisation's responsibility to provide the context in which stress is identified and tackled, but there are some additional things you can do to manage stress.

UNISON'S TIPS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

- Monitor any changes to how you are feeling. There are a wide range of stress symptoms including sleeplessness, memory problems, tearfulness, headaches, anxiety and reduced performance.

- Inform your line manager as soon as you feel yourself under stress and ask for help to deal with the difficulties. The sooner you identify and take steps to address any problems the better. As soon as your manager is aware of your stress, they have a responsibility to support you.

- Make sure you are getting regular supervision sessions with the opportunity to review your workload and reflect on your practice.

- Keep a log of your working hours and make sure you take your time off in lieu and annual leave.

- Remember, if you are suffering from stress it's not your fault. Too often social workers keep quiet and blame themselves for not coping. Instead, you should raise it in writing with your manager.

- Ensure that your concerns and any action to address these are recorded and keep a copy of the minutes from any meetings. Take care not to agree to a plan that you do not feel is workable.

- Your employer has a legal duty to assess the risks of stress and put in measures to control, eliminate and prevent them. If you think your employer is failing to do this, contact your local UNISON representative for advice.

- Consider accessing any other additional support from occupational health or your GP.

SOCIAL WORKERS' OWN TIPS

"I have a metaphorical box beside me with a heavy lid. If I am continually thinking and worrying about something, I put it in the box and close the lid. I know it is there when I need to think about it, but for now it is held securely in the box and I do not need to be thinking about it."

"I have a pad of paper and pencil by the bed and if I wake up in the night thinking about something which needs action the following day I scribble a brief note (often just one word) knowing that I do not need to stay awake thinking about it as the note will remind me in the morning."

"If I am in a potentially or actually threatening situation I symbolically move down through the gears, as when driving a car, so that I become more aware and alert but also more in control."

"If I am really worrying about something I will seek to speak with someone I trust so that I know someone is aware of my concern even if there is nothing they can do about it but with the knowledge and feeling I am now not totally alone."

"I make action lists, but I keep them with what I have tackled/ticked off so that it does not just show what I have still to do but what I have already tackled and achieved."

Developing emotional resilience

Emotional resilience – which can be loosely defined as the ability to weather life's storms without becoming overwhelmed – can not only protect social workers from work-related stress, but also help them to flourish and ensure the best possible outcomes for service users. Given the demands of social work, it's really important that organisations provide their social workers with the support and guidance they need to develop effective coping strategies. The following article is an extract from the Community Care Inform guide, Developing emotional resilience and wellbeing in practitioners.

What is emotional resilience?

Emotional resilience is a dynamic interplay between personal characteristics and supportive external factors. Social workers who develop resilience 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.

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. Developing emotional resilience will help social workers adapt positively to demanding working situations and enhance their professional growth.

Although 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.

UNISON SAYS

Resilience depends on personal circumstances and the support social workers have available. It is crucial managers provide staff with the support they need so staff develop effective coping skills and strategies. Employers should encourage a culture of wellbeing and self-care for all their social workers. This should include access to preventative strategies and information about a range of wellbeing tools and work-based wellbeing activities.

Resilience – the underlying competencies

To help social workers and their employers to develop their emotional resilience, several competencies have been identified. Research has highlighted the following social and emotional competencies, which are likely to build resilience in social workers.

- **Emotional literacy (or emotional intelligence)**
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, while 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.

• Reflective thinking skills
Reflection helps workers consider how to adapt practice to individual service users' needs and develop solutions. 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.

• Empathy
Empathy is a fundamental component of all helping relationships. Multi-dimensional models of empathy are useful because they encompass:

- empathetic concern (feelings of warmth, compassion and concern for others);

- personal distress (feelings of anxiety and discomfort resulting from the negative experiences of others); and

- perspective taking (adopting the positions of others).

This approach acknowledges that empathy is complex and does not always have beneficial effects.
   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.

• Social competence
Social workers are often faced with challenging interpersonal situations but being well prepared can improve 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.
   Social confidence is a key factor in developing emotional resilience and supporting effective relationships with service users. It also helps to develop strong and supportive social networks with colleagues, friends and family, which is 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. Mutually supportive relationships also foster feelings of connectedness, belonging and empathy with others.

• Supervision and organisational support
In addition to informal social support, social workers need formal support through supervision and from the wider organisation. There is strong evidence that supervision, provided on a regular basis within

> ## "A flexible repertoire of coping styles enhances the capacity for resilience and wellbeing."

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.

• Optimism and hope
There is evidence that optimistic people are more resilient, healthier and happier than pessimists. 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.

• 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 because it encourages feelings of mastery, control and effectiveness and contributes to positive emotions during difficult times.
   The ability to recognise when a coping strategy is ineffective in a particular situation and then try alternative strategies is a key competency. A flexible repertoire of coping styles enhances the capacity for resilience and wellbeing.

• Self-compassion and self-care
Compassion towards the self is essential to sustain the wellbeing of helping professionals.
   Self-compassion is thought to have three components, each with opposing states:

a. self-kindness vs 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 vs isolation: recognising that suffering and personal inadequacy are part of the human condition, rather than something differentiating us from others;

c. mindfulness vs over-identification: taking a balanced and accepting approach to our negative emotions, so feelings are not avoided or exaggerated.

> For more information, and all references, please see our full guide by Louise Grant and Gail Kinman on Community Care Inform.
>
> CommunityCare informAdults   CommunityCare informChildren

TEST YOURSELF

Try an emotional resilience quiz on Community Care Inform.

How UNISON's Professional Services Unit can support you

What to do if you hear from your professional regulator about a complaint regarding your fitness to practice

It can be a really daunting and worrying time when you are being investigated by your professional regulator, particularly because some social workers are reported by members of the public so may not immediately know there is even an issue.

UNISON has a specialist team to specifically support our members during this time to ensure you receive continuity of support and expert representation. Our Professional Services Unit (PSU) is familiar with all professional fitness to practise proceedings and provides advice and guidance about the things you need to do and, just as importantly, the things you should not. We support you at each stage of the process and work to achieve the best possible outcomes for you.

Our PSU team achieve very good outcomes for UNISON members with most allegations closed with no case to answer.

The UK Social Worker professional regulatory bodies are:
- Care Council for Wales (CCW)
- Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC)
- Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC)
- Social Work England (SWE)

How UNISON helps

If you receive a letter or email from your regulator, make sure UNISON is your first port of call. Please do not leave it, no matter how worried or scared you are. The sooner you contact us, the quicker we can put support in place for you.

Make sure you are a member of UNISON. Hopefully you will never need to call on us for this representation, but if you do we can only help you if you have been a UNISON member for at least four weeks continuously before the alleged problem or complaint happened.

If you meet this condition – and you have been referred to your regulator by your employer, the police, a service user or anyone else – then contact your local UNISON representative immediately. If you don't know who your representative is, call UNISON's helpline on 0800 0 857 857 for contact details for your branch.

What you will need to do
- Your branch rep will ask you to fill out a UNISON CASE form – you can find more information and download a copy here.

- Please fill the form in fully, providing us with as much information as you know. Don't say 'see documents' as this is the first time our unit will hear directly from you. The more we understand about the allegation at this stage, the quicker we can get help in place.

- Please use a personal email address to communicate with us. Your regulator can request disclosures from your employer, including email correspondence.

- We encourage members to write piece of professional reflection as we believe this is more in keeping with current practice. We also recognise that the cases you deal with are complex, so reflecting can often be an easier way of capturing the context of what you faced at the time and how you dealt with it. We recommend using the Gibbs model of reflective practice and this article may help.

- Do not communicate with your regulator, all of this will be done by UNISON.

- Do not resign from your post. We know that this can be a very stressful time and can impact on your health so if you feel unwell see your GP. If you resign without it being discussed and advice sought, it could affect our ability to represent you and your case with your regulator.

- Do not self-refer to your regulator until you have sought UNISON advice locally. Many social workers think that they must self-refer when in fact there are a very limited number of reasons when you have to. Whatever the circumstances, talk to us first so you can make an informed decision.

- Once you have completed the case form your local branch will start the process to refer the matter to us. We will then review all the information and assess your case. To do this we will email you to book a triage assessment call with you.

Interim order hearings
Some matters are really urgent. A regulator can require an urgent hearing if the allegations are serious. These are called interim order hearings; they are a one-day hearing to risk assess the situation. Under the law the regulator only has to provide you with seven days' notice of this type of hearing. If you receive communication giving you notice of this, you must contact us immediately. Even with extremely limited notice we will ensure you have representation.

UNISON's PSU team will then support you throughout the case until it concludes in full.

- Find out more about UNISON's Professional Services Unit.

Signposting other UNISON support

Help from your representative
As a UNISON member you have direct access to representatives who are available to support you. There are different kinds of workplace reps and they can each help you in different ways.

Help from UNISON's welfare charity
Members experiencing financial and emotional difficulties can contact our welfare charity, There for You, which provides a confidential advice and support service for members and their dependants.

Help from UNISON with social worker training and CPD
See this resource for a selection of CPD, personal development and other training opportunities. They are provided by either UNISON or our learning partners to enable you to develop in your work.

Help from UNISON's legal scheme
As a UNISON member you have access to UNISON's legal scheme, as long as you have been in membership for four weeks before the matter for which you are seeking legal assistance occurred.

For further details of UNISON's legal scheme please see:
- Members' guide to UNISON Legal Services
- Stress claims protocol
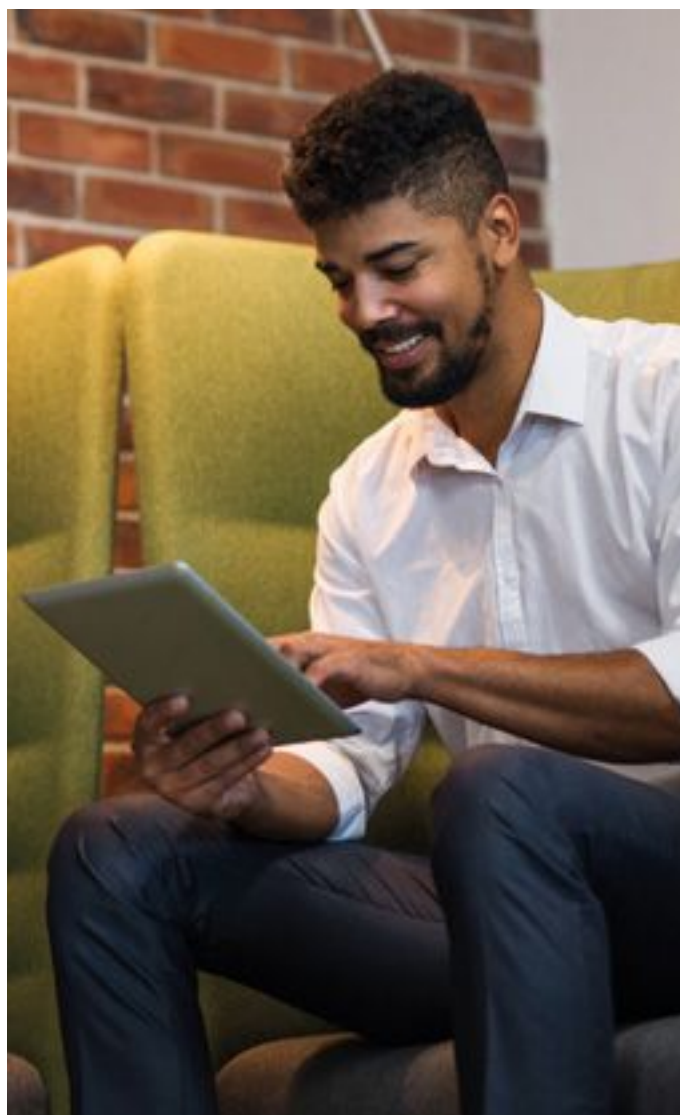
Links to UNISON guidance and factsheets
- Bargaining over workplace issues during Covid pandemic
- Covid 19 guidance for Black members
- Covid 19 risk assessments for Black, disabled and other vulnerable workers
- Covid 19 guidance for disabled members
- Domestic violence and abuse
- Equality and diversity: a trade union priority
- Guide to accessibility in conducting virtual meetings
- Harassment at work: a UNISON guide
- Homeworking
- Hot desking
- How to work safely
- Mental health (bargaining) guide
- Online bargaining guides
- Pregnant workers and Covid 19
- Stress
- UNISON guide to dealing with online virtual hearings:
- UNISON Stress Claims Protocol
- Tackling bullying at work
- Violence at work – it's not part of the job
- Whistleblowing
- Women's health – a workplace issue
- Women's mental health issues – not to be ignored at work
- Working alone

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£8,001 — £11,000	£6.60
£11,001 — £14,000	£7.85
£14,001 — £17,000	£9.70
£17,001 — £20,000	£11.50
£20,001 — £25,000	£14.00
£25,001 — £30,000	£17.25
£30,001 — £35,000	£20.30
£35,001 — and over	£22.50

Essential cover for you – join online at **joinunison.org** or call free on **0800 171 2193**