

Ten ways to thrive in social work

Trainer, author and SWU Ambassador **Neil Thompson** and general secretary of the Social Workers Union **John McGowan** distil top tips from their book *How to Survive in Social Work*

1 Expect to struggle

By its very nature, social work is a demanding occupation. With the added pressures of the current inhospitable political climate and underfunded state of public services, it should come as no surprise that a significant proportion of people are struggling to get through their workload. This is nothing to be ashamed of. It is a reflection of the wider context and says little or nothing about individual capabilities. This is not to say that some people do not have their own issues that affect how well they cope with the pressures. But the idea that struggling is a sign of personal failing is a gross (and grossly unfair) oversimplification.

2 Don't blame yourself

For far too long there has been a destructive blame culture in social work (and public services more broadly). What can make the situation much worse is when people blame themselves for things not going very well - even to the point where they start to assume they are not competent enough. The technical term for this is 'Imposter Syndrome.' It describes situations where people doubt themselves to the point where they feel they are not good enough for the work expected of them - as if they are an imposter pretending to be a competent worker.

3 Be assertive

No, being assertive does not mean being stroppy, difficult or demanding. It means having the confidence and negotiation skills to work towards win-win outcomes. Often it amounts to saying 'no' or at least 'no, but ...' Sadly, we have come across many people who became ill with stress, because of work overload. A significant proportion of them have told us that they just passively accepted more and more work and made little or no attempt to negotiate a more reasonable workload. There are various reasons why this sad state of affairs arises but in most cases it boils down to people either not having the requisite assertiveness skills or choosing not to use them.

4 Don't expect a 100% success rate

It has been said that the only profession with a 100 percent success rate is undertakers. No matter how competent we are or how hard we try, the reality is that we will never achieve 100 percent success in social work, nor should we expect to. Imagine how stressful it would be for police officers if they were expected to clear up every crime and convict every perpetrator. The only fair expectation is that they do their best in difficult circumstances. Why should that not apply to social workers too? Things will go wrong and mistakes will be made. But if we are doing our best and acting in good faith, we can hold our heads up high (whatever the gutter press may say).

5 Look after yourself

This has been said time and again, but it remains true that far too many people put other people's needs first and thereby put themselves at risk. Not practising self-care is dangerous in any work setting. In such a demanding profession as social work, it is extremely so. It has to be recognised that we are in no position to help people meet their needs if our own needs are not being met. How would you feel if you needed the help of a social worker, but it was clear they were exhausted and on the way to burnout? Would you feel you were getting a fair deal?

6 Make use of support

Some organisations are not good at supporting their staff, but even in those that are, there can often be a reluctance to ask for help. It derives from the fact that stress continues to be stigmatised and seen as a sign of a weak individual (rather than the sign of an overloaded system). Surviving - and especially thriving - depend on making full use of the support available and moving away from this dangerous idea that 'support is for wimps.' Anyone doing as demanding a job as social work who is not prepared to make use of support is playing a highly risky game.

7 Keep learning

High levels of pressure can lead to a sort of emotional paralysis that stops people exploring new ideas or methods. This therefore acts as a significant barrier to learning. This can then lead to a vicious circle. Because social work is such complex and demanding work, we need to keep learning all the time. Once we stop, our ability to be effective is diminished. This means that our ability to manage our pressures and keep stress at bay is also diminished, leaving us all the more prone to that very paralysis. So, keep learning, come what may, is the key message.

8 Don't lose sight of your values

That same paralysis can also lead to losing sight of our values - not intentionally, but because we narrow our focus to just getting through the day, just getting the job done to relieve the massive pressures we are under. This too invites a vicious circle whereby the motivation, drive and reassurance that come from our values are lost. Again it leaves us ill-equipped to cope with the pressure we face. Our values are important not only for ethical reasons, but also for their role in sustaining us through difficult times and territory.

9 Support one another

Unfortunately, one of the effects of a high level of pressure is that it can force people to withdraw into their own 'security bubble' for their own protection. This is understandable, but it is also a problem, because it undermines teamwork and solidarity. It is essential in such difficult times that we pull together and support one another. It is what teamwork is all about; it is what BASW is all about; and it is what SWU is all about. Let's make sure that it happens.

10 Have faith in yourself

Another consequence of a constantly high level of pressure is that we can lose confidence in ourselves. We feel we are struggling so much that we start to lose faith in ourselves. This too is understandable, but also problematic. If we do not have faith in ourselves, other people will not have faith in us and, without that credibility, our very difficult job becomes even harder, if not impossible.

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