

SWU Trade Union Advice and Representation Officer **Christina Ramage** shares a reflective piece that a SWU member had written and shared with A&R



I wanted to share with you a reflective piece that a social worker had written, at a time when she felt isolated, professionally criticized, and very vulnerable. We know that through these last months we have had to adapt on a daily basis to the impact Covid-19 has had on the whole of society. However, in

social work we continued our frontline work, without any media appreciation of the cost this had to our own lives and the family around us. During my work with this member, she described the events before lockdown as being overwhelming, the caseloads too high, the lack of adequate supervision, her own supervisor presenting as disengaged, and her commitment to the work was taking over her life. She began to question everything she thought she knew about herself as a professional, and the profession itself. However, she remained committed to her role in social work and had a high regard for the organization she worked for. This led to further internal conflict about things not being supportive around her and deteriorating to the point she felt that no matter how hard she worked the line management needed, wanted, expected more.

There was an investigation into her practice that added significant pressure during lockdown, she had to dig deep and keep an objective perspective to be able to reflect on events and what the contributory factors were. We often forget as we move through our work at a high-pressured pace with a view of deadlines, statutory requirements, regulatory demands, and standards that we need to stop sometimes and consider the social work values we work to. If we do this, then surely applying them to ourselves, the working environment, and our expectations of fairness then many such situations can and would be avoided in many instances.

There could not be a better example of someone who is committed to her organization and the work they do but the demands placed upon her become overwhelming and unrealistic. She considers herself professionally competent and went on to demonstrate this throughout subsequent proceedings. But we need to sometimes ask how did we get here, if policies and procedures are

followed would we make better decisions as managers? In allocating work, in weighting caseloads and in monitoring social workers through the supervision process, we should be aware of the impact the work has upon individuals and never lose sight of the joint responsibility between the worker and the line management accountability to support and sustain the work we do.

Lockdown Chronology

Lockdown has been very difficult and the depletion in my resilience has been determined by many factors. I am a single woman living alone with a workload that is disabling. The news is full of the statistics for black people posing a greater risk of dying from Covid19. This knowledge served to intensify my fears around the virus.

I voiced worries around the impact of heavy workloads and competence – not because I felt incapable, but because I was exhausted by work pressures and not enjoying good health; but continuing to work. At the same time, I was exposed to so many challenging situations at once with my carers, service user having cancer, audit causing negative comments about case notes, and the breakdowns of placements for 6 young people. My daughter having coronavirus at the same time my mum had an accident were both emotive and worrying events. Supervision should have been the forum to take how I was feeling, yet there was seemingly no place on the agenda, or time given to discuss emotion in supervisions with my manager. I'm not a senior social worker but have the highest caseload and manage much that requires management intervention. My supervisor failed in her duty of care to me by making supervisions a tick box exercise during which she presented as tired and indifferent and she has only once asked how I was during the past year.

Since lockdown I've been self-alienating; working like a machine and not allowing myself to feel. In ordinary circumstances this would have been fine; however, during lockdown, I've been unable to balance such a maladaptive coping strategy with my usual opportunities for regular social engagement, so to help me look at the issues I decided to keep a chronology of events as they unfolded and impacted on me professionally and personally.

6th to 10th March

Leave cancelled March due to heavy workload. Worked on Saturday 7th March to support a new child moving in.

10th March

Last day in the office. Advised to work from home due to roadworks for next two weeks.

Caseload of 24 children and 8 Carers.

Struggling to manage and told manager behind with recordings.

Had a physical meeting with manager and colleague requesting a new SSW.

12th March

(Daughter, 22), visiting for a few days to see her niece. She is not feeling great - tired and a little giddy.

Weekend 13th to 15th March

Monthly weekend with M, (granddaughter), ahead of her 3rd birthday on Monday.

Call from St Vincent. Mum's had an accident - she was making porridge and fainted face first into the pan. Serious burns. She's 82, but fit, able and independent. A shock to realise no matter how young she seems, the years are still there. Doctors can't tell why she fainted.

M is unwell with a chest infection. Crying all the time. Not like her.

Saturday night realized my daughter has coronavirus.

All following week daughter is frighteningly unwell, she's burning one minute yet so cold the next needed to heat her with the hairdryer; vomiting, piercing headache, struggling to walk as bones hurt. Hospital say 99% coronavirus; but won't allow her admittance until 7 days have passed. Manager allowed me 2 days off. By day 11, daughter much better. Managed to get her home the day before lockdown.

April

Workload heavier than ever. So many risk assessments and policies to urgently change due to coronavirus.

I live by myself and lockdown is very lonely.

Church are doing services on Zoom. Church and speaking to friends/family are my only social outlets.

Diagnosed with Sciatica. Continued to work.

Member of church family and friend's mum passed away from coronavirus.

Five annual reviews to type, doing them OOH's as no time during the day.

Managing allegations for family.

No time to switch off. Exhausted.

May

Broke wrist on 3rd when I lost balance on my new Kangoo Jumps. Work is so constant, I just wanted to try out something fun. In a lot of pain and not sure I can continue to work; told manager. Working anyway and using the voice recorder for some things.

Friend's hen weekend and Church weekend away now cancelled. Friend's wedding not until next year now too.

Got a mole on my chest checked. I'll monitor.

Stressed. Made error at work and now fear consequences. Sad no recognition of the 2:00am finishes, just what's done wrong.

So very tired. Asked again for 2 weeks to get straight. Manager dismissive.

24th May

Manager sent incorrect medical information about my wrist. Told her what was wrong with document. I won't sign until changed.

Breakdown of placement after 10 years. So much work on this. Glad could arrange respite at least.

26th May

George Floyd. As a black woman it pains me to see this. Things still do not change.

June

Manager seems to be panicking about things not done. She keeps calling. Denying conversations have happened. What's that about?

5th suspended. Why call me at 6:30pm? Shocked. Bereft. I can't pay my bills without my degree. Being a social worker is the career I put myself through university as a single parent to achieve. I've been working like a machine towards outcomes that feel impossible. Feel broken.

Mole looking bigger. Video appointment with GP who asked me to go in physically. I have an emergency hospital appointment - directly after my hearing. Terrified, but sadly my suspension isn't allowing time to think about this.

Flat tyre from puncture - just add to the list ...

Main holiday to Caribbean with my closest friends cancelled. Nothing to look forward to this year now.

Suspension ongoing. It feels like a foregone conclusion - but I have representation to support me

It feels almost traitorous to have not gone to the BLM rally at the weekend. An important issue I should have supported; but fear of potentially being caught up in troubles and the risk that this may be used against me by my employer overshadowed.

Hearing held; representation supported me.

The outcome was positive for me, and I have returned to work. Things are very different. My manager has changed, and I've had a significant reduction in my caseload. Work are demonstrating a very supportive approach. The entire process - over a very long 2½ weeks, was beyond scary; but was necessary too in a strange way, so the changes needed could be brought about. This has been a huge learning experience in so many ways.