

## **Why Self Care is Crucial for Social Workers**

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### **Abstract**

Practicing self-care is crucial for social workers. The field of social work contains many professions that are rewarding and fulfilling, but they can also be draining for those professionals. Many social workers have reported experiencing burnout, or beginning to feel drained due to a consistent large amount of stress. Another thing social workers have experienced is compassion fatigue, which is a feeling of mental and physical exhaustion brought on by being exposed to the stress, pain, and emotions of people that social workers are helping. If social workers never learn to practice self-care regularly, they will have a difficult time recovering from experiences, which can affect their performance within their careers and lead to their clients not receiving the help they need. In this paper, examples of self-care and the benefits of it are discussed, and it is reiterated why this practice is so important for professionals within the field of social work. With the right amount of self-care, a social worker can provide the best help possible, which will ultimately make this world a better place.

*Keywords:* self-care, burnout, compassion fatigue

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## **Why Self Care is Crucial for Social Workers**

### **Introduction**

The social work profession comes with many benefits for an individual. Social workers can describe their job as rewarding, satisfying, fulfilling, and purposeful. A social worker's purpose is to work with people through their issues and to help them in the best way that they can. The work these professionals do in our society makes people's lives easier and happier. Overall, social workers make the world a happier and better functioning place. Even though the work can be very rewarding and does incredible things for our society, it can also become very overwhelming for most professionals. Social workers have also described their work as exhausting, challenging, and difficult. This is why social work professionals must learn how to take care of themselves within their professions, even if they are passionate about their job. Social workers should all be aware of the importance of self-care and the different ways to engage in self-care so they can not only be the best help to their clients but also have the most fulfilling experience in their jobs.

There are many ways in which our world is broken: there are families who can't afford to feed their kids, people lay awake at night feeling hopeless and depressed, some kids don't have families who can take care of them, elderly people are left with no support in their old age, and there are so many more aspects of sadness and darkness. Because of all this brokenness in our society, there is a large variety of work that social workers can do. Social workers are able to lend support and guidance to people, as well as finding solutions and easier paths to take for those who are struggling. The areas of social work expand from therapy to casework, to foster care and school social workers. Because of this variety in the field, there are also many different ways that social workers can become weary in their profession based on the work they are doing.

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When a social worker, or any professional, has been working at an intense pace for a long time, they might start to feel overwhelmed and experience this feeling called burnout. This term describes when a social worker begins to lose the ability to operate in a helpful and professional manner in their work. "...this progressive state of inoperability can take many different forms, from simple rigidity, in which the person becomes 'closed' to any input, to an increased resignation, irritability, and quickness to anger" (Smullens, 2013). This experience is not enjoyable and can cause great distress for social work professionals, as well as inhibit these individuals from being able to do the best work possible for their clients. If a professional is feeling closed off or irritable in their own lives and in the ways they relate to the people in their personal lives, then it can only lead to them reacting poorly to those who these social workers are trying to assist. Clients come to social workers because they struggle with situations they can no longer handle on their own. Ultimately, if social workers are also not able to handle their own struggles, then they will not be able to carry the burdens of another person. Simply put, no one can pour from an empty cup. According to the National Association of Social Workers, "social workers have an ethical responsibility to address impairment or personal challenges that could interfere with professional decision-making and services to clients" (NASW, 2008). We as social workers commit to helping others, and most of us choose this profession because we are passionate about the good that it does in the world, so we also should be dedicated to doing the best possible job that we can, which also includes learning how to take care of ourselves as well. The feelings and mental states of social work professionals are just as important as the mental states of the clients we work with.

Similar to burnout, another term social workers may experience is compassion fatigue. This term is the "overall experience of emotional and physical fatigue that social service

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professionals experience due to chronic use of empathy when treating patients who are suffering in some way” (Newell & MacNeil, 2010 as cited in Smullens, 2019). Compassion fatigue can occur when a social worker sees that a client is not improving or just in general when they are handling the weight of someone’s emotional burdens for a long time. Hearing about terrible and distressing events people have faced can weigh on a person significantly, and when that practice is your daily work, it quickly can become draining. Individuals who enter the field of social work professionally are usually very caring and emotionally focused people, so when they spend every week hearing about how others are struggling over damaging things that have happened to them, it can be a lot to process. Even if a professional is meeting with a total stranger, many of the reasons people come to social workers are usually heart-breaking. Listening to heart-breaking stories every single day would be draining to any normal person, but for someone who is a social worker and who usually has a big heart, it can be extra exhausting. Eventually, if you spend so much time dealing with others’ issues your heart will get tired, which can lead to you no longer having the ability to be compassionate with your clients in the same way you did when you started.

A high number of social workers have reported feeling some type of burnout or compassion fatigue. With a large amount of focus on emotions within these professions, it is easy to begin to feel overwhelmed and drained from the work we do. “Compassion fatigue and coping with secondary trauma may lead to a lifetime burnout rate as high as 75% for social workers” (Todorov, 2022). This statistic shows that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of social workers have said they experience burnout and have dealt with the exhaustion that can come from working in their profession for a long time without the right amount of breaks. In addition, since burnout and compassion fatigue can lead to a social worker not being able to help their client in the way they

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need, if 75% of social workers were constantly feeling burnout without having any way of taking care of themselves, then so many people would be lacking the help that they desperately need.

People come to social workers for help navigating their struggles, but if the social worker also is not able to handle their troubles, then even more dangerous or unfortunate things could happen to these clients. Without learning techniques of self-care and figuring out the best way to take care of yourself, the entire field of social work would not be successful.

The idea of choosing to take care of ourselves seems a bit backwards to professional social workers because we were trained to take care of others. “Sometimes the last person social workers nurture is themselves” (Jackson, 2014). It is in their nature to focus on taking care of others, so it feels abnormal for social workers to focus on their needs when their entire profession is all about the needs of others. But, in the same way that we must work toward having our clients learn they must prioritize their needs, we will have to listen to our advice and prioritize our needs as well, even if it feels uncomfortable. People within the field of social work tend to be very selfless and are not used to choosing to take care of themselves first, which is why it is so rare to see a social worker pay attention to their needs and take a break from working as hard as they can to help their clients. Everyone wants to do their best within their careers, and in a social worker’s career, their goal is always to be able to help their clients as best as they can and not stop until they have found a solution for them. But social workers are humans too who have problems and feelings, so they deserve to be taken care of as well, even if it means taking a short break from thinking about their clients.

Many different activities and habits can be used as self-care practices. People’s first thought when they think self-care tends to be taking a bath, reading a book, listening to calming music, or going on a walk when it’s nice outside. These are great examples of self-care and can

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help someone clear their mind and relax, although there are so many other ways to take care of yourself. Everyone is unique, and their version of relaxing may be completely different from someone else's, which is why self-care can take many different forms. Some people find relaxation in socializing, others like to treat themselves to a nice meal, while others would prefer to just be alone for a few hours. Some examples of self-care are exercising, spending time alone, engaging in your friendships, having a healthy diet, planning an event to look forward to, taking days off occasionally, getting a good night's sleep, meditation, and any other type of activity that you find personally relaxing (Headspace.org, 2019). Self-care means something different to every person within social work, and it can have very different effects based on the type of self-care someone partakes in. Other articles mention some good self-care and stress-reducing techniques for social workers are focusing on your breath various times throughout the day, guided imagery, mindfulness meditation, yoga, and getting enough sleep (Shersher, 2022). Any form of self-care is acceptable; there is no wrong answer. As long as the individual chooses an activity that is remotely healthy, rather than turning to alcohol or drugs, for instance, it's a great thing to take time to do things to relax and treat yourself. Each person would need to do some exploring to find what types of self-care work best for them, and when they figure out what those strategies are they should partake in those activities regularly or whenever they need a break.

A 2016 study "explored the effects of self-care practices and perceptions on positive and negative indicators of professional quality of life, including burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion satisfaction among MSW practitioners" (Bloomquist, et al., 2016). There are many results from this study showing how different types of self-care had different effects on social workers based on how helpful they were. One finding was "physical self-care was the most frequently practiced domain with average scores indicating between monthly and weekly

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use. This was closely followed by the use of professional and emotional self-care. The most practiced activities overall included laughing, spending time with friends and family, and taking time to chat with co-workers” (Bloomquist, et al., 2016). Since social workers tend to be relational people who are emotionally focused, it was not shocking to read that they felt better after spending time with loved ones or doing activities that caused them to laugh. Community is another aspect in the field of social work that is so crucial for not only the success of the professionals but also for their emotional and mental well-being. Being able to create bonds with co-workers and have a solid relationship with your supervisor is also important so everyone in your company can lean on each other when you feel fatigued and drained. The results of the study showed there are many different ways that people can take care of themselves and each of them can be helpful in the professional social work field.

There are many reasons why partaking in self-care is important to social workers, and there are many benefits that can come from it. If social workers regularly took care of themselves in different ways, whatever helps them out the most, they could avoid experiencing burnout. Burnout and compassion fatigue may be inevitable within the profession, but with self-care strategies, an individual can avoid experiencing these feelings for long periods, and they would be able to know how to handle those experiences when they do happen. Being a professional social worker is a draining profession at times, but if these professionals were to learn how to be on top of taking care of themselves and allowing them some time to treat themselves, then the job could become much more manageable. This can make a social worker’s job even more fulfilling in the long run.

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