

Helping the Helpers: Secondary Traumatic Stress among Social Workers Social Work Assistance Network – “Let Us be There for You...For a Change”

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It is no secret that social workers have challenging jobs. We are highly educated, skilled, dedicated and resilient. Social workers often engage in careers where the work involves enhancing the wellbeing of marginalized and oppressed populations, protecting vulnerable children and families, adhering to the basic needs of individuals, and assisting people in solving challenges they face. More specifically, our jobs can involve exposure to traumatic situations including suffering, crises, inequality, loss and other difficult and sensitive situations. Thus, social work professionals who work directly with trauma survivors are indirectly exposed to trauma themselves through the therapeutic process. Regardless if we work with trauma survivors, have an excessive caseload, or lack support at home or at work, social workers are not immune to many of the problems faced by our clients, thus increasing the difficulty to advocate for others if you are also suffering mentally and emotionally.

In the case of trauma, as social workers assist their clients through their narratives, we may begin to visualize such events. Consequently, social workers, as well as other helping professionals, experience psychological distress. Burnout and secondary traumatic symptoms commonly occur among many healthcare professionals. As such, these

problems may be manifested by chemical dependence, depression, anxiety, marital, and family issues. Similar to how a social worker would advise one's client to seek treatment, if these problems remain unattended, most of them will worsen, and may affect job performance, family relationships, and personal wellbeing. It is easy to assume, because of our training, that we are well-equipped to handle the burdens of our profession. After all, we knew the challenges we might face and still chose this path. What we did not or could not know was how likely we might face difficulties in our personal and professional relationships, produce low-quality work, or express irritability towards colleagues and clients as a result of those long hours or carrying a client's burden.

It is therefore imperative to have resources and policies readily available to help the helpers. Supportive resources can help social workers build their internal 'tool-box' that aids in navigating their career, providing them the ability to grow and protect themselves.

There are various means, services, and strategies that assist social workers in coping with, and preventing, secondary traumatic stress. The Social Workers Assistance Network (SWAN) is one such available service.

SWAN is a NASW-MA Chapter program which provides professional consultation and referral to any social worker with personal problems. The program is designed to support professional

social workers identify and access services of need. These services include, but are not limited to, helping social workers cope with secondary traumatic stress, providing advocacy and consultation, and providing access to information. The service affords social workers confidential consultation to help identify problems and find appropriate treatment. The SWAN Commission is a voluntary network of Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers, and NASW members, who are committed to helping colleagues. These voluntary members do the initial confidential telephone consultation and referral. SWAN Commission members may make a referral to a social work therapist in NASW's Social Work Therapy Referral Service, to appropriate agencies, or self-help groups. Information and referral is provided at no fee. If further services are required, every effort will be made to refer the caller to a social work professional who will provide services utilizing your insurance benefits or at an affordable fee.

If you feel SWAN can be of assistance to you or you have a question about the program, simply call 1-800-635-SWAN (7926) at any time. All calls will be handled by a secure and confidential answering system. The calls will be recorded by machine and returned by a SWAN Commission member within twenty-four hours. Social workers should not be expected to abandon the excellent work they do because they lack the support they so willingly provide for their own clients. If you need help, please consider the SWAN motto- "let us be there for you...for a change." ❖