

Managing Stress as a Child Welfare Caseworker

Caseworker Readiness Activity

Child welfare work is complex, demanding, and inherently stressful for all caseworkers. This can be especially true for new caseworkers who may have unrealistic expectations for themselves as they begin their new job. It's important for them to look to other caseworkers and the unit supervisor for support and assistance.

Factors that may increase stress for caseworkers include:

- Administrative and/or public scrutiny
- Ensuring compliance with all mandates as well as agency policies and procedures
- Changes within the organization (staff, policies, etc.)
- Inadequate or ineffective supervision
- High caseloads
- Increased work demands due to brief and/or long term staff vacancies
- Lack of adequate support within the agency
- Removing a child from the home
- Hostile clients
- Case crises
- High profile / traumatic cases
- Terminating parental rights
- Lack of community resources for clients
- Values and ethics conflicts
- Getting behind in documentation
- Testifying in court
- Criticism from other colleagues - both within the agency and from other organizations
- Performance evaluations

Activity:

Ask the unit supervisor about resources the agency has to help caseworkers manage job related stress. How are they accessed?

Talk with the unit supervisor about the availability of a staff support group.

Excessive stress can manifest itself in a number of different ways. Being familiar with some of the more common emotional, behavioral and physical indicators will assist caseworkers in their self care. Child welfare professionals will also find the information beneficial as they work directly with children and their families.

Emotional Indicators

- Unable to make decisions
- Feeling anxious, tense, nervous, unable to relax
- Easily irritated
- Diminished sense of humor
- Getting angry over minor things
- Feeling unworthy or not good enough
- Depression

Behavioral Indicators

- Withdrawing from friends, family, and co-workers
- Working harder but getting less done
- Excessiveness (e.g. in smoking, drinking, eating, spending, etc.)
- Scapegoating (blaming others, finding fault, being critical or hard to please)
- Difficulty having normal conversations with family and friends
- Arriving late to work and/or to appointments, etc.
- Argumentative
- Deteriorating work performance
- Taking increased time off for minor ailments

Physical Indicators

- Frequent headaches, colds
- Digestion problems
- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Unexplained changes in weight
- Clumsiness / accident prone
- Decreased interest in sex
- Deterioration in personal appearance
- Poor concentration
- Change in sleep habits (too much or too little sleep)
- Sleep disturbances (e.g. interrupted sleep, difficulty getting to sleep, not be able to get back to sleep if awakened in the night, difficulty getting up in the morning)

- Feeling tired / drowsy all day
- Feeling run down most of the time

Caseworkers may find a few of these strategies helpful in reducing both work-related and personal stress:

On-going Strategies

1. Become aware of personal stressors and the accompanying emotional, behavioral and physical reactions.
2. Recognize what can be changed.
 - Can the stressors be avoided or eliminated completely?
 - Can the intensity of the stressors be reduced? (For example, can the stressors be managed over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis? Setting goals and using time management techniques may also be of help.)
 - Can the exposure to stress be shortened by taking a break or leaving the physical premises?
3. Reduce the intensity of emotional reactions to stress.
 - Realize that it is impossible to please everyone all of the time.
 - Assess critical and urgent tasks to determine if they really rise to that level of importance
 - Try to put things in their proper perspective.
 - Do not labor on the negative aspects and the "what if's."
4. Learn to moderate the physical reactions to stress.
 - Practice slow, deep breathing to bring the heart rate and respiration back to normal.
 - Add helpful reminders to the screen saver such as "Take a deep breath"
 - Learn to say "no"
 - Practice relaxation techniques to reduce muscle tension.
 - Spend more time enjoying nature
5. Build physical reserves.
 - Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging).

- Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.
 - Maintain an ideal weight.
 - Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants.
 - Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away from the desk occasionally.
 - Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with a sleep schedule as possible.
6. Maintain emotional reserves.
- Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships.
 - Pursue realistic goals which are personally meaningful.
 - Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.
 - Extend the same kindness and gentleness to oneself as would be offered to a best friend.
 - Practice living at a slower pace.
 - Make time for fun and relaxation.

As Needed Strategies

1. Take a few deep breaths; allow the rib cage to expand while inhaling. Exhale slowly.
2. Seek a change in venue. Getting away from the work station, even for a walk to the break room, can help a person collect his or her thoughts and refocus on the task at hand.
3. Laugh out loud at a joke or friend's story.
4. Play with stress-relieving toys or games like mini-basketball, darts, foam stress balls, punching bags, Sudoku, crossword puzzles, etc.
5. Sit with eyes closed and listen to soothing music or to the quiet.
6. Write down everything that needs to get done. Set time frames and block out what will get accomplished when. Dividing the workload into manageable chunks, each with an allotted time, will help one feel more relaxed about the tasks ahead.
7. Concentrate on one task at a time. Stressing about work not yet done only detracts from accomplishing the task at hand.
8. Manage energies wisely by prioritizing the workload. Put in less effort for low-priority jobs, and avoid expending energy on unimportant tasks.
9. Ask for assistance when feeling overwhelmed.

10. Acknowledge and celebrate the work accomplished. Give oneself a pat on the back instead of immediately rushing into the next task and creating more stress.

Activity:

After reviewing the factors that increase stress, the indicators of stress, and strategies to address it, identify those items that seem most relevant for you.

Develop a plan now, as you prepare for the job ahead, that is individualized to meet your needs. For example:

What part of your job might you expect to be stressful?

What indicators do you think you might have that indicate stress?

What strategies will you try to relieve stress?
