

Ohio Child Welfare Training Program

Supervisor Checklist

Helping Caseworkers Manage Work-Related Stress

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Written by the Institute for Human Services for the
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Helping Caseworkers Manage Work-Related Stress

In the field of child welfare, there are specific, recurrent sources of stress that caseworkers experience. Supervisors are critical in helping workers identify the sources of work-related stress, and in managing stress and other negative feelings associated with the work. Following are some sources of stress associated with child welfare work.

Sources of Stress in Child Welfare Practice

The supervisor can use this list in discussion with staff, either individually or in unit meetings, about sources of stress they have experienced in child welfare casework.

- Insufficient time to do the assigned work
- Knowledge about the maltreatment of children
- Children on open cases who are maltreated again by their caregivers
- Frustration about parents who are unable or unwilling to protect their children
- Empathy about parents who seem to try to provide safety, permanence and well being for their children, but are not successful
- Worry that casework services are not adequate to protect a child or preserve a family
- Constant demands from families, managers, and other community providers
- Policies and procedures that seem not to make sense or that interfere with achieving case goals and objectives
- Organizational barriers that prevent effective practice
- Lack of cooperation from other partners and community agencies
- Negative media attention on difficult cases
- Inadequate funding, inability to access or provide essential services
- Community's attitude toward the agency and its work
- Caseloads are too high, do not allow personal attention needed by individual families

- Unclear priorities, and continually shifting priorities, preventing anything from ever being completed
 - Each worker's personal sensitivities and reactions to stressful situations
 - Competing demands from family, spouses, one's own children, and other person factors that may increase work related stress
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Supportive Supervisory Activities

Supportive activities of the supervisor are directed toward creating a psychological and physical climate that enables staff to feel positive about their job. These proactive strategies can help to insulate workers from stress, and create an environment where the worker feels assured that he can receive help coping with work-related stress.

- Periodically in unit meetings, lead a discussion with staff about sources of stress they have experienced in child welfare casework. Issues of stress felt by workers should be addressed during each case conference and /or unit meeting.
- Provide an empathic, respectful, caring and supportive environment in which workers can comfortably discuss their casework issues.
- Encouraging staff to express and constructively resolve their feelings and concerns about maltreated children, parents' actions, agency practices, and community opinions.
- Develop and support a safe learning environment in the unit: use mistakes as an opportunity to teach and learn; encourage all members of the unit to offer solutions and to learn from each other; acknowledge individual members' contributions to the team learning.
- Support staff's attempts to develop competence, effectiveness, self-directedness, creativity, and independence in their work to achieve outcomes for children and their families.
- Use ITNA data to guide workers in selecting training needed to develop competence and confidence in their work. Use strengths-based strategies to encourage staff to give input about unit work. When giving staff feedback about their work performance and relating to supervisees in a direct but understanding and non-authoritarian manner. Help staff think through, prioritize, and develop plans to manage competing demands. Be sensitive

and responsive to the worker's personal needs, and in helping staff understand how these impact their work. Be sensitive to work stresses and concerned for staff well-being.

- Be available to provide consistent emotional support and understanding.
- Help staff recognize and honor the incremental progress of families as they move toward providing a safe environment for their children.
- Personally recognize individuals' effective and successful work with clients that achieve desired outcomes and that can confirm a worker's confidence and sense of self-worth and competence.
- Provide recognition and positive reinforcement for the work of staff.
- Emphasize appreciation of cultural diversity and its benefit for the unit and families served.
- Develop and support a teamwork approach in the unit.
- Build the capacity of unit staff in making decisions by using consultative and group decision making strategies, or delegating responsibility for certain decisions to the team.
- Involve staff in unit planning and decision making.
- Encourage peer support and collaboration, especially when a worker has a difficult case.

Individual Supervisory Support

Following are supervisory strategies that may be useful when a worker is experiencing heightened stress that is affecting their work with children and families; or, if not addressed, will soon affect their work. The supervisor can be proactive in the following strategies:

- Offer one-on-one emotional support and understanding to decrease feelings of isolation.
- Assist the worker in organizing the workload, re-prioritizing tasks, and delaying deadlines.
- Help staff identify, develop, and link with appropriate in-agency and community resources and supports who can contribute to meeting client needs and reduce the worker's personal workload.

- If decreased confidence in certain areas of the work is contributing to the worker's stress, offer training that would address relevant practice issues.
 - Engage unit staff in strategies to relieve a team member's stress level.
 - Temporarily reassign job tasks or provide staff support to counter overload from highly stressful or overly active caseload.
 - Arrange for flexible work scheduling or job-sharing of high-stress tasks.
 - Reduce the stress through job-enrichment activities (giving more meaning to the work), job diversification (increasing the variety of job-related tasks), or job rotation (to alternate services in the agency).
 - Make referrals to counseling and other supportive services to address personal emotional needs or family situations.
 - Evaluate flex and vacation time balances, Encourage the worker to use accrued vacation or flex time as a tension-relieving measure – a day off in the middle of the week, an afternoon off, the opportunity to work at home. (Leave time would depend on office policy).
 - Make a temporary assignment from the field to the office with temporarily diminished contact with clients can help the worker take time to rest and regroup.
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Personal Support

Caseworkers have other potential sources of support. Encourage a stressed worker to consider these personal resources:

- Effective and successful work with clients that achieves desired outcomes could confirm a worker's confidence and sense of self-worth and competence.
- The worker's peer group (both within and outside of the unit) can provide understanding and feedback, and can be knowledgeable about the unique sources of stress of child welfare work.

- The worker's social and spiritual support network of family and friends may be supportive, but their limited understanding of the factors also limits their support. The caseworker is also limited by confidentiality requirements and cannot really discuss the problems and dilemmas they face with the families on their caseload.
- The worker's own capacity to adjust, and make adaptations ultimately affects his response to stress.

Some content adapted from Dorman and Shapiro, *Preventing Burnout in Your Staff and Yourself* (CWLA 2004)