

a message for fostering managers

the impact of stress on social workers surrounding allegations

With social workers increasingly experiencing stress, Adrian Vaughan from FosterTalk explains how their FISS service can support Fostering Managers to alleviate it.

Research by Community Care magazine in 2015, said that 80% of social workers believe stress levels are affecting their ability to do their job. This is a staggering figure, which the British Association for Social Workers (BASW) say is unlikely to change until it is acknowledged and employers find methods to deal with the situation.

Talk of ‘being stressed’ is often used colloquially, sometimes without much thought. Lloyd *et al* (2002) defines that: “A stressor is a demand, situation or circumstance that disrupts a person’s equilibrium and initiates the stress response of increased autonomic arousal. Prolonged stress is associated with chronic anxiety, psychosomatic illness and a variety of other emotional problems.” Given the responsibilities, and predicaments that social workers find themselves in, this isn’t something to be taken lightly.

The causes of stress can vary - our interactions with social workers reveal numerous touchpoints. Broadly, they can be placed into four categories: demands from service users; demands from the organisation; demands from external organisations and the media; and personal demands.

Making the right decision

Managing the decision of whether a child should be removed when an allegation is made is one cause of stress, due to balancing safeguarding stipulations with the obligation to provide a stable home. There are feelings of loneliness in managing this risk; although safeguarding decisions may be taken by managers, the views of or risk assessments by social workers is predominantly the basis for their decision.

There is a real fear of making the wrong decision. Having made an evaluation, social workers might face a conflict of values and judgements with their manager’s or the agency’s decision.

The emotional effect of allegations

The emotional impact of allegations on social workers is seldom considered when overseeing the needs of children in care. Complaints or allegations against foster carers can occasionally result in counter-claims. Foster carers can sometimes blame or turn against a

social worker for making a value judgement.

The emotional costs of handling allegations also take their toll. Rushton (1987) proposed that because social workers are trained in non-judgemental client relationships, they may persevere and assume personal responsibility. This, along with their sensitivity to client needs, can make them emotionally vulnerable to work-related stress.

Even when allegations prove unfounded, uncertainty remains as to the safety of the foster carer, with a dilemma of whether to continue placing children with them. All this within the context of an allegation can create emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (Maslach *et al*, 1996).

Hiding emotions, perhaps for fear of how this will look on their professionalism, can be equally damaging. Research conducted from 2012-2015 by the University of East Anglia advocate that emotional intelligence training for social workers can yield benefits, especially because their rate of work related stress and burnout is high compared to similar professions.³

Administration and organisational behaviour

The way departments are set up and the administration involved is also a cause for concern.

A BASW survey discovered that social workers are facing administrative overload and are, as a result, spending less and less time with vulnerable children.

This only hinders a social worker dealing with allegation matters, causing him or her to feel overwhelmed. There is a prevailing concern about unmanageable caseloads putting social workers at a high risk: evidence isn’t always gathered, there are fewer home visits, and their attention is diverted to other areas.



The consequences and coping mechanisms for some social workers in all given situations make for grim reading. These range from being too stressed to sleep or being reduced to tears, through to relying on medication to cope with stress.

Supporting social workers from within the organisation

Much can be done to support social workers by their Fostering Managers. This includes providing regular access to a competent manager, good quality supervision, balanced and realistic workload, clear guidance and expectations, access to impartial advice, and a working together culture between all relevant agencies.

FosterTalk support mechanisms

By investing in a range of strategies, fostering managers can help to create a culture to promote resilience, and better support the wellbeing of social care professionals:

- 1) There is the opportunity to join one of our useful training sessions in managing allegations. Here, social workers can be made more aware of the techniques needed for good practice. For more information, click [here](#).
- 2) If your workplace is registered with us as an organisation member you can take advantage of three helplines: a 24-hour legal assistance; 24-hour counselling support; and the fostering advice helpline. These serve to reduce stress during the period of an allegation, and advise you or your foster carer of the best course of action.
- 3) One way to give support is to encourage open dialogue with members our FISS (Foster carers Independent Support Service) team; trained professionals who provide an impartial sounding board with the various concerns a social worker has during a period of allegation. It should be noted that any opportunity to talk freely without fear or favour has a positive effect: in the survey, 41% said that just the fact they [managers] had listened helped.

In summary, it's clear that while children must always be the priority, the need to protect frontline staff from stress and burnout should not be neglected.

References

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- ⁵ Maslach, C., Jackson, S. & Leiter, M. (1996). *Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual*. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- ⁶ BASW. (2012). The State of Social Work 2012. *The British Association of Social Workers*. (p. 5).

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