Stress: Impact on Ethical Behavior

By

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**Brief Bio:**

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**Writers Comments Regarding this Topic:**

The word “stress” is generally used when someone perceives that everything has become too much to deal with. At times, everyone has felt overloaded and wondered whether they can cope with the pressures placed on them. According to a survey published in HR Magazine in 1997, 48% of all workers respond to job stress by performing unethical or illegal activities. Furthermore, 58% of the respondents admit that workplace pressures have caused them to at least consider acting unethically or illegally on the job. Besides having to cope with the normal workplace stress, social workers have an added responsibility to adhere to a code of ethics to maintain licensure. It is important for social workers to be aware of how stress can impact them to avoid unethical behavior.
Brief Course Description:

This course will discuss:

- “Good and Bad” Stress
- How stress affects a person’s physical, psychological and behavioral status
- General principles of social worker ethics
- The impact of stress on ethical behavior
- How stress can be mitigated to avoid unethical behavior.

Course Objectives:

1. Define stress
2. Define ethics
3. Define ethical dilemmas
4. Define ethical principles
5. Explain how stress can have a positive and negative impact on an individual
6. Identify the main precepts of social work ethics
7. Explain the fight-or-flight response to stress.
8. List 5 physical changes caused by stress
9. List 4 psychological changes caused by stress
10. List 3 behavioral changes caused by stress
11. List 1 example of how stress can cause unethical behavior
12. List 4 stress reduction techniques
INTRODUCTION

An understanding and acceptance of ethics is vital to the practice of social work. Without this, social workers cannot provide meaningful and effective services to their clients. Social workers are often placed in the middle of ethical dilemmas while fulfilling their responsibilities to their clients. Social workers must always balance their duty to their clients against the needs and interests of society and their employer, time constraints and deadlines, large and challenging caseloads, limited or inadequate resources, crises and emergencies. This does not take into account possible personal situations that the social workers may be undergoing. These issues put social workers under a great deal of stress. A survey, published in HR Magazine in July, 1997 and conducted by the American Society of Chartered Life Underwriters, the Chartered Financial Consultants and the Ethics Officer Association discovered that 48% of the respondents had performed, and 58% had at least considered performing, unethical or illegal acts as a result of workplace stress. This was a direct result of the workers responding to job pressures and the resultant stress they were placed under.

There is little social work literature that directly explores the impact of ethical dilemmas on social workers. However, literature relating to social worker stress was undertaken by Cherniss (1980), Freudenburger (1980), Malsach (1982), and Pines (et al, 1980) who found that human service workers subjected to stressful work environments experienced stress-related disorders. Later work by Courneyer (1988) claimed that
professional impacts of work stress could include changes in work performance and prejudice against certain clients, among other things. A study conducted by Weissman (et al 1983) led to the findings that stress was a contributing factor to ineffective management of cases. Hawkins and Shotet (1989) linked work-related stress with moral indecision. Joseph (1988) and Conrad and Joseph (2003) determined there was a loss of a sense of commitment to the profession and a disengagement and distancing from clients resulting from stress. These types of behaviors contradict the code of ethics every social worker has the obligation to follow.

STRESS

Before understanding how stress can impact a social worker's ethical behavior, it is important to understand what stress is. Most people, when they hear the word “stress”, assume it is always bad and our lives would be better off without it. However, without any stress at all, lives would be boring. Have you ever ridden and enjoyed an amusement park ride that scared you? Gone to a scary movie that had you cringing in your seat? In this sense, you are actually “enjoying” stressful situations. We are physically responding to the situation in the same way we would if we were faced with an unpleasant situation that frightened us, such as dealing with a threatening client. Anytime people are faced with a challenge or dilemma, they are motivated to resolve it. This, too, can be a source of stress, either good or bad. “Bad” stress results from a feeling of being overwhelmed or powerless. How people react to stressful events depends on how they perceive them.
Even when people experience “bad” stress, it may not be negative to their behavior. It may encourage them to resolve their issues in innovative ways and may give them a sense of accomplishment when the dilemmas are resolved. It is only when the “bad” stress is prolonged that it can be harmful to people. The signs of the effects of stress fall into 3 main categories:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Behavioral

**PHYSICAL SIGNS OF STRESS – “FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE”**

When faced with a challenge or threat, the body activates resources to protect itself – to either stay and fight or get away as fast as possible. This fight-or-flight response is the body’s sympathetic nervous system reacting to a stressful event. Bodies produce greater quantities of the chemicals normally found in a body (cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline) during this time. These chemicals trigger a higher heart rate, heightened muscle preparedness, sweating and alertness. Non-essential body functions slow down, such as the digestive and immune systems. This enables all of the body’s resources to be concentrated on getting enough oxygen in its blood, mental alertness, and muscle strength to handle the event.

Briefly, when people are stressed, the following physical symptoms occur:

- Blood pressure rises.
• Breathing becomes more rapid.
• Digestive system slows down.
• Heart rate (pulse) rises.
• Immune system is compromised.
• Muscles become tense.
• Sleep is disturbed (heightened state of alertness).

People continually size up situations that confront them in life, deciding whether something is a threat or not, how they can deal with it, and what resources they can use. If they feel they have the required resources to deal with the situation, it is not considered stressful to them. However, if they feel that they don't have the required resources, it is seen as stressful to them. People respond differently to a given situation based on their perception of the situation.

Three main reasons why people respond differently to a situation are:

• They all do not interpret the situation in the same manner.
• They do not call on the same resources due to their interpretation of the situation.
• They do not all have the same resources and skills available to them.

By observing how a body responds to the fight-or-flight response induced by stress, it is easy to see how persistent stress can adversely affect people’s health. It can not only create a health crisis, but it can exacerbate an underlying health concern they may already have. Some of the effects of prolonged stress on a body can be:
• A tendency to sweat
• Back pain
• Chest pain
• Cramps or muscle spasms
• Erectile dysfunction
• Fainting spells
• Headache
• Heart Disease
• Hypertension (high blood pressure)
• Loss of libido
• Lower immunity against diseases
• Muscular aches
• Nail biting
• Nervous twitches
• Pins and needles
• Sleeping difficulties
• Stomach upset

PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS OF STRESS

Stress impacts a person’s psychological well-being. How people perceive the stressful event will be important because it will determine their emotional response to the situation. Prolonged stress will increase negative perceptions on how well they can
handle any stressful event. The more helpless they feel, the more stress they experience; it becomes a vicious cycle. Some of the psychological signs of stress are:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Burnout
- Depression
- Feeling of insecurity
- Forgetfulness
- Irritability
- Problem concentrating
- Restlessness
- Sadness
- Fatigue

These resultant feelings can cause social workers to be incapable of handling their client’s needs effectively.

**BEHAVIORAL SIGNS OF STRESS**

It is common for people under stress to have a greater tendency to engage in unhealthy behaviors. Social workers are no exception. These unhealthy behaviors can further increase the severity of symptoms related to stress, often leading to an increase of those symptoms and unhealthy behaviors. Some of the behavioral signs of stress are:
• Overeating
• Poor appetite
• Food cravings
• Sudden angry outbursts
• Drug abuse
• Alcohol abuse
• Higher tobacco consumption
• Social withdrawal
• Frequent crying
• Relationship problems
• Lack of exercise

These behavioral changes will impact not only on their health status, but their psychological status as well. It can affect their professional ability if they become ill or impaired. It is extremely difficult to care for the welfare of others when they cannot handle their own well-being.

PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL WORK ETHICS

Ethics is universally accepted as a set of recognized and accepted standards of what is right and wrong that are codified into a formal set of rules which are explicitly adopted by a group of people. The social work profession has its own ethical principles. Two professional organizations, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) have taken the lead
in defining a set of ethical principles to guide social workers in their professional conduct. Also, a number of international agreements and declarations regarding human rights provide useful guidance to social workers in negotiating the ethical dilemmas that are inherent in their profession. These agreements include:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
- The Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights
- The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention

Following is a list of principles derived from these agencies and agreements that serve as a guide to ethical behavior for social workers:

- Social workers should support the right of each individual to make his/her own decisions as long as doing so does not impinge on the rights or welfare of others.
- Social workers should advocate the full participation of their clients in the world around them.
- Social workers should treat each person as a whole person and keep in mind that the person functions and plays a role in the family, the community, and society at large.
- Social workers should focus on identifying their client’s strengths and developing them.
• Social workers have an obligation to challenge discrimination and prejudice.

• Social workers should recognize and foster diversity and respect cultural, ethnic and religious differences.

• Social workers should distribute the resources available to them equitably and fairly on the basis of need.

• Social workers should challenge social injustice by protesting unfair policies and lobbying for the equitable distribution of resources and the just treatment of employees and citizens.

• Social workers should challenge social oppression and bias that leads to certain individuals being excluded from full participation in society.

• Social workers should learn the skills required for their profession and work at maintaining their level of professional knowledge.

• Social workers should not use their skills or professional privileges to advance purposes that hurt others, such as terrorism, torture and deception.

• Social workers should not abuse the trust that their clients place in them by placing their own personal gain before their client’s needs.

• Social workers should be guided by the principles of compassion for the plight of others.

• Social workers should pursue the professional and personal paths that will enhance their knowledge and well-being so that they will be better able to serve their clients.

• Social workers should maintain strict confidentiality with respect to any information received from their clients.
• Social workers must recognize the conflicts of interest that exist between their responsibility to their clients and their obligations to their employers and colleagues and duty to follow the law and the regulations applicable to their profession.

• Social workers have an obligation to pass on what they know and assure that future social workers receive adequate training by getting involved with social work schools whenever possible.

These principles can be summarized by the following 4 concepts:

• Respect for a Person’s Autonomy – the right to self-determination, privacy and veracity (duty to tell the truth).

• Beneficence – the duty to do good.

• Non-Malfeasance - the duty to avoid harm.

• Justice – treat everyone as equals and provide equal care to all.

By reviewing the signs and symptoms of the effects of stress on ethical behavior, it is easy to see how these principles can be compromised. Since social workers are routinely placed in the middle of ethical quandaries, it is imperative that they understand and accept these ethical guidelines. They must also be aware of how prolonged stress can affect them and can prevent them from fulfilling these obligations. They should then take steps to overcome the impact that stress has on their ethical behavior.
STRESS REDUCTION TO MITIGATE UNETHICAL BEHAVIORS

Prolonged stress can cause social workers to inadvertently breach their code of ethics. An action such as calling out sick when a person is not really ill is a contradiction to veracity. Providing scarce resources to a favorite client over another one goes against justice. Using coercive language to sway a client to accept recommendations so care plan objectives can be accomplished nullifies autonomy. Being constantly interrupted at work by the telephone or co-workers can slow you down and prevent you from meeting time-line obligations. This can cause a conflict with co-workers and supervisors, preventing the fulfillment of the principle of justice and perhaps veracity if reports are not written objectively and completely. Ulrich (et al, 2007) conducted a survey of 1215 randomly selected nurses and social workers in the United States. Respondents reported feeling powerless (32.5%) and overwhelmed (34.7%) with ethical issues in the workplace and frustration (52.8%) and fatigue (40%) when they couldn’t resolve ethical issues. When people feel frustrated and tired, they often lash out at others and find it difficult to think clearly. This can affect a social worker’s ability to perform responsibilities following the precepts of beneficence and non-malfeasance. Being impaired by substance abuse can affect a social worker’s ability to fulfill ethical professional responsibilities.

Stress becomes even more of an issue when a social worker is faced with an ethical dilemma. By definition, an ethical dilemma involves the need to choose from among two or more morally acceptable courses of action, when one choice prevents selecting the other. For example, a kidney is available for transplant. An elderly person and a young
person are both good matches. The elderly patient has been on the waiting list longer, but the younger person would have a better chance of survival post-transplant. The interdisciplinary team must make a decision as to who will get the kidney. The conflict between these types of choices can lead social workers to doubt their selection which, in turn, can lead to further stress.

These are just a few examples of how stress can lead a social worker to perform unethical acts. Although stress can not be eliminated from the workplace, some techniques for stress reduction can mitigate its affect on social workers. Stress reduction techniques can be classified into 2 major areas:

- Self-care
- Work-place remediation

SELF-CARE

- One of the most important aspects of self-care is to have a work-life balance. The 2007 Deloitte & Touche USA Ethics & Workplace study found that 91% of the respondents were more likely to behave ethically at work when they had a work-life balance. It is important to remember that a job does not define a person’s identity. Just like their clients, social workers function and play a role in their families, communities, and society at large. They need to balance their time and energy between all of their roles and not let their social work responsibilities be foremost in their minds. They need to leave work at work and seek other activities to maintain a good work-life balance.
Performing vigorous activity or exercising on a regular basis has been proven to have a beneficial effect on a person’s mental and physical state (at least 4 times per week).

Alcohol and drugs will not help anyone manage stress better. Either stop consuming them completely or cut down.

If consumption of coffee and other drinks which contain caffeine is high, cut down.

Eat a diet high in fruits and vegetables, low in fat and make sure a healthy and balanced diet is maintained.

Be sure to get adequate rest and sleep (between 7-8 hours per day).

Make sure to set aside some time each day just to relax and pursue activities of interest.

Take time for fun and enjoyment. Laughter can make a person feel good both physically and mentally.

Establish good friends and relationships with family members to provide a good support system.

Communicate with your family to express your thoughts and worries. Putting feelings into words and sharing them alleviates stress.

There are some effective breathing techniques which will slow down a person’s biological system and help the person to relax.

Other relaxation techniques such as meditation, massage, aromatherapy, reflexology or yoga have been known to greatly help people with stress.
• Attend a stress management course or read self-help books on stress management reduction.

• Finally, if stress is affecting the way a person functions and the stress can not be mitigated, seek professional help. Heightened stress for prolonged periods can be bad for a person's physical and mental health. Pharmacological assistance or counseling/psychotherapy may be beneficial.

WORK-PLACE REMEDIATION

• Identify what “triggers” stress in the workplace and try to reduce or avoid the triggers. Speak to co-workers and/or supervisors to change the environment to eliminate or alleviate the triggers.

• If a social worker is in an out-of-balance environment where the worker is expected to put in a lot of overtime and assigned tasks which are impossible to accomplish, the social worker should speak directly to a supervisor about this. Sometimes, if a social worker readily accepts all assignments to try to get ahead in the profession, the supervisor may not realize the stress the person is being put under.

• Set clear boundaries. Learn when to decline a project that is above the regular work-load, even if the social worker feels it will help professionally, if it will place undue strain on the ability to competently complete necessary work.

• Set priorities to work tasks. Normalize the day as much as possible into a routine. This will create predictability in the day which, in turn, will decrease
stress. Don’t sweat the small stuff that occurs. Prioritize the goals, objectives, and activities that are necessary and focus on them.

- Don’t procrastinate. Putting off work and fretting about possibly not meeting a work deadline is stressful. Break tasks into small parts and handle them one at a time. Sometimes looking at the big picture can seem overwhelming and stressful.

- Re-frame the perception of the stressor. If the situation is viewed as negative, this causes stress. If the situation is viewed as a challenge to be successfully solved by skill and knowledge, the impact will be positive rather than negative. Treat the situation as an opportunity to grow professionally.

- Learn the coping style of managing stress. Patterns of behavior that are used to handle stress may be maladaptive or helpful and productive. Social Workers should look at their “normal responses” to stressors and try to determine the best way to cope with the stress in their lives. Social workers should then incorporate these helpful coping mechanisms into their normal patterns of behavior.

- Take breaks during the day and decompress. Sitting at a desk all day and eating lunch while working will not help a social worker get more done. Workers get mentally tired from prolonged exposure to their workload. They actually become less productive. Getting away for short breaks and lunch can refresh people who will then be more ready to complete their tasks.

- Take action instead of being a victim. A contagious part of stress is complaining about how unfair or miserable a workplace is. Social workers can feel more in control of their workplace and not victimized by it by trying to correct a stressful
milieu. They can do this through discussions with their supervisors about corrective measures that can be taken.

- Be flexible. The best way to survive the effects of stress is by being flexible. Every day social workers make decisions as to where to put their time and energy. They are frequently interrupted by crises or other issues. When social workers acknowledge that interruptions are a “norm” for their workday, the interruptions will be less stressful. Flexibility will then enable the social workers to be better able to handle any work situations.

- Seek out personal support systems in the workplace. Co-workers share the same types of stressors and can provide emotional support. If a traumatic event occurs, critical incident stress debriefing (CISD), which involves discussing the event as soon as possible after it occurs, can lessen the long term after-effects of the incident.

- Maintain optimism. Social workers go into the profession because they love what they do. They need to remind themselves of that to recapture their passion for social work. So much of what they accomplish depends on their attitude. One of the best ways to maintain optimism is to have hope that the goals they set for themselves will be met and they will have a positive impact on their clients.

- Finally, have a sense of humor. This can be a form of reframing the perception of stress in the workplace. Laughter can lighten any load. Voltaire said: “The most important decision you make is to be in a good mood.”
CONCLUSION

An overview of stress and its effects:

- Stress is a normal part of life that can either help people learn and grow or can cause them significant problems.
- Stress releases powerful neurochemicals and hormones that prepare us for action (fight-or-flight).
- If people don’t take action to reduce stress, the stress response can create or worsen health problems.
- Prolonged, uninterrupted, unexpected and unmanageable stresses are the most damaging types of stress.
- Stress can be mitigated by utilizing stress reduction methods such as regular exercise, meditation or other relaxation techniques, structured timeouts, and learning new coping strategies.
- Many behaviors that increase in times of stress and maladaptive ways of coping with stress, such as drugs, alcohol, smoking and eating, can actually worsen the stress and make people more sensitive to further stress.
- The management of stress is mostly dependent on the ability and willingness of a person to make the changes necessary for a healthier lifestyle.

Stress and ethical behavior create an oxymoron. An oxymoron is a combination of contradictory or incongruous words. Social workers are known for their ethical practices while providing care to their clients. However, prolonged stress may cause any professional social worker to perform unethical behaviors. Studies have shown that
stress can make social workers feel overwhelmed and out of control, resulting in various forms of unethical behavior. Stress can affect social worker’s physical, psychological and behavioral status, causing them to nullify the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice. Techniques to reduce stress in the social worker can be classified as self-care and work-place remediation. By utilizing stress reduction techniques, the social worker can overcome the tendency to perform unethical behaviors. This would eliminate the dichotomy of placing social workers and unethical behaviors together.
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- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC)

- International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

- Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention