Building resilient practitioners

Liz Beddoe & Carole Adamson
University of Auckland,
Allyson Davys WINTEC
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Key objectives

- Consider the role of supervision in building resilient social workers
- Consider one hour of supervision
- Explore aspects of resilience, hope and optimism in professional life
Resilience

- Resilience can be ‘encouraged, cultivated or disrupted, but certainly not taught or imparted by well-intentioned professionals’ (Furedi 2009, p. 99).

- Rather, resilience emerges from the actions people take when faced with challenging and unexpected circumstances and ‘through improvisation and adaptation’ to changeable and challenging circumstances (Furedi 2008, p. 658).
Student stress

- In the health and social care professions, student placements also provide the opportunity to test out their capacity to demonstrate critical thinking and anti-oppressive practice (Nzira and Williams, 2009).

- Students on placement face stressful challenges.

- Stress tests their resilience and optimism.

- Problematic stress gets in the way of learning.
Stress

- Stress- ‘the product of complex interactions between environmental and organizational demands and the individual’s ability to cope with these’.

- Problematic stress or ‘distress’ arises ‘from a disparity between the perceived demands made on an individual and their perceived ability to cope’ (Collins 2008, p.1176).
Sharon is a 4\textsuperscript{th} year student on placement in a community mental health service. She is an able, enthusiastic student, keen to get involved but less enthusiastic preparation.

Sharon arrives at supervision visibly upset and struggling to present as composed. She is obviously not prepared for supervision.

The supervisor notes all this and chooses, at this point, to attend to Sharon’s distress but makes a mental note to raise the issue of preparation with Sharon at some point.

(Case study from Davys & Beddoe, 2009)
The home visit

- The client, Paulette
- The front door
- The neighbour
- The flight to the car
- The angry tears
Sharon feels helpless, incompetent, foolish.

How can she be a social worker if she can’t even get in the door to talk to the client?
Sharon describes her feelings: anger, frustration, helplessness and embarrassment.

She talks about all her enthusiasm for the visit and how she had looked forward to her first solo home visit. She describes Paulette as “spiteful” and “ungrateful”.
Distancing

Satymurti (1981): the prevalent coping strategy used was defensive disengaging, depersonalizing distancing, which led to workers stereotyping service users as helpless, immature and difficult.
Ventilation

- Collins (2008) cites Carver et al (1989) who suggested ‘over-use of ventilation and sympathy seeking for long periods may not always be adaptive and can impede ‘adjustment’, as it is believed too much focus on distress can distract people from active coping and movement beyond distress (in Collins, 2008, p.1180).
Reflective Learning Model
For Students

Source: Davys & Beddoe (2009/2010)
Supportive yet challenging supervision

Sharon is able to examine her own position in the situation.
She realises that she wanted so badly to do this ‘right’.
The neighbour not only exposed her inability to make a connection with Paulette, but also embarrassed her by making her a party, however unwillingly, to a putdown.
The supervisor asks Sharon how she would have liked it to be. What was her goal in visiting this home? … to make contact with the Paulette, establish a relationship, gather relevant information.

What could she have done differently?
Sharon is unable to answer this question. She seems stuck in her feelings about Paulette and judgements of her behaviour. She is unable to imagine what was happening for Paulette when she refused to answer the door.
This is an important teaching moment....

- Review the purpose of the visit and asks her what process she would follow in preparation for any home visit.
- Note the lack of preparation and a framework for assessing potential issues which might arise from a new visit.

Paulette has a long history of dealing with official agencies and had had three children taken into care. When she is unwell she can become very suspicious of strangers and fierce about her privacy from interfering social workers and neighbours.
Encourage her to make a plan with her new understandings.

What she would do if, after all of this preparation, Paulette still refuses to answer the door?

Sharon recognises that she does not have total control over events …if she has followed through with her preparation, she will have done her best and will be able to withdraw from the situation and consider the next step with her supervisor.
Coping strategies (Collins, 2008)

- Seeking support for instrumental reasons, seeking **practical advice**, assistance or information—part of problem-focused coping.

- Seeking support for emotional reasons, namely getting **moral support**, sympathy or understanding—part of emotion-focused coping.

- Talking about stress-related thoughts and feelings helps people to impose a **cognitive structure** to facilitate integration and resolution of stressful experiences.
Resilient workers

Stewart Collins (2007) asks:

- What might enable some workers to persist, endure and thrive in their careers, compared to others who may become ill and sometimes eventually leave the profession?

- What personality characteristics can enable social workers to ‘keep going’, to deal with both the day-to-day and the longer term demands of social work?
What is resilience?

- **Psychological Resilience** is the positive capacity of people to cope with demands, stress, change and trauma. It is also used to indicate a characteristic of resistance to and protection against future negative events.

- In this sense resilience corresponds to cumulative *protective factors* and is used in opposition to cumulative *risk factors*. 
Three assumptions about emotions (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997)

1) That students are emotionally affected by their experience with service users and that these feelings will appear in supervision;
2) That if students can tolerate experiencing and thinking about their emotional responses to working with clients they will tap into a rich source of information about core issues and concerns in their clients’ lives, and
3) Understand better how their own feelings, if not acknowledged and addressed in supervision and personal reflection can stifle hopefulness and belief in own and clients’ potential.
Hopefulness
‘Personal hope refers to how the social worker develops, uses, and sustains hope in his/her own life—in goal setting, in being aware and developing hopeful moments, through feelings such as confidence, in the use of social support or spiritual beliefs to strengthen hope, and in actions taken to reach an outcome’ (Koenig & Spano, 2007, p.48)
‘Professional hope refers to how a professional develops and sustains hopefulness in two important contexts—social work education and agency practice’
(Koenig & Spano, 2007,p.48).
Optimism

Optimism ‘involves positive, relatively stable, favourable expectations and outcomes for the future; it is associated with making positive cognitive appraisals of situations, then with making active, engaged coping efforts to deal with stress, making the best of whatever is encountered’ (Collins 2008 ).
Reflective questions: for students

- What is your experience with developing and reaching goals?
- What ideas and experiences have helped you learn to be aware of hopeful moments?
- How do your emotions affect your growth and use of hope for yourself (e.g. self control, confidence)?
- What kinds of relationships and/or environments have fostered hope in your life?
- What is the role of spirituality in helping you to develop and sustain hope?
- What actions have you taken in your personal life as a result of hope in your capacities to change?
- How does your experience of trying to change affect your hopefulness?
Supervision and stress

Stanford’s study of social workers reflections on interventions supports supervision as providing a place for rekindling of hopefulness:

Recognition of hope and the possibility of change, alongside a commitment to care therefore need to become directives, as opposed to incidentals, of practice. Supervision is a site in which this orienting framework could be mutually explored and supported by managers and practitioners. Critical reflections of interventions could be used to support this process (Stanford, 2007, p. 257).
Messages from research

- Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie (2009) recently reported a meta analysis in which they found that ‘Effective supervision, therefore, can delay or mitigate the effects of detrimental factors and can contribute to positive outcomes for workers in social service organizations’ (Mor-Barak et al, 2009, p.25).
Emotionally resilient social workers (adpt. Greene 2007)

- **Insight**: explore and accept the impact of your own life experiences and the limits of your ability to influence others, understand the differences of others;

- **Independence**: set and manage boundaries, develop interdependencies with colleagues to underscore safety and support;

- **Relationships**: connect with clients and colleagues, explore language and meanings for self and others, look for, nurture and maintain positive supervision
**Initiative**: mastery of new skills, critical reflection, inquiry, praxis

**Creativity**: experiment, explore, take the risk of trying new or different approaches, work with and observe others, retain hopefulness;

**Humour**: see light and shade, look for fun and liveliness, use humour respectfully to raise spirits, use humour among colleagues to name the things that challenge and threaten;

**Morality**: use codes of ethics to provide a structure for ethical decision making, believe in change, be guided by the wisdom of thinkers as well as doers.
What kind of activities will you develop to foster resilience in the students you supervise?
References


e.beddoe@auckland.ac.nz