



School Social Work Association of America Position Paper

Promoting Self-Care for School Social Workers

In the 2021 amendments to the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics, an emphasis on self-care was added to address widely recognized challenges such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary trauma in the practice of Social Work. While these challenges have existed throughout the 100-year history of this specialization of School Social Work, their prevalence has been more pronounced with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that has interrupted learning in schools. The following statistics highlight the elevated levels of anxiety, grief, trauma and burnout currently impacting School Social Workers:

- Historically, each year, 1 in 5 persons experience challenges with their mental health. In 2021 that ratio has increased to 1 in 4 (Johns Hopkins University, 2021).
- During COVID-19, the percentage of adults with an anxiety or a depressive disorder increased from 36.4% to 41.5%, and
- The percentage of those reporting an unmet mental health care need increased from 9.2% to 11.7% (Vahrtian, A., Blumberg, et al. 2021)

With the 2021 amendments to the NASW Code of Ethics, the purpose section states, ***“Professional self-care is paramount for competent and ethical social work practice. Professional demands, challenging workplace climates, and exposure to trauma warrant that social workers maintain personal and professional health, safety, and integrity. Social Work organizations, agencies, and educational institutions are encouraged to promote organizational policies, practices, and materials to support social workers’ self-care.”*** (NASW, 2021)

Social Workers have responsibilities to clients, colleagues, the profession, and the broader society and so they become less able to fulfill these responsibilities if they do not implement self-care practices in order to mitigate the effects of burnout. It is important to remember that it is not a question of whether or not School Social Workers will cope with stress. Rather, the question is whether the coping mechanisms School Social Workers use will be healthy or unhealthy, whether they will ultimately serve the School Social Worker or negatively impact the School Social Worker's life. School Social Workers need the assistance of School Social Work supervisors and school administrators to address organizational characteristics that contribute to burnout. SSWAA offers these additional considerations, mapped to our national practice model, to encourage organizations to foster atmospheres that encourage the individual self-care practices.

Provide evidence-based education, behavior and mental health services

- Studies by Agresta (2006) and Pamperin (1997) suggest that role ambiguity is a contributor to burnout. School Social Workers are advised to work with administrators and other mental health support staff such as School Counselors and School Psychologists to clearly define the role of the School Social Worker in the district.

- Although the roles of School Social Workers frequently change, Staudt (1997) found that this only led to burnout if School Social Workers did not receive proper training to fulfill new roles. Related to this, Leyba (2009) recommended the use of professional development days to receive training and obtain CEUs to maintain licensure so that the School Social Worker does not need to use personal time to do so. School Social Workers and School Social Work supervisors can take the initiative to identify appropriate training and request permission from administrators to use professional development days to attend. Administrators can approve the School Social Worker's participation in such opportunities.
- Establish a realistic workload with administrators. Having a manageable workload can decrease turnover, raises job satisfaction, increase the quality of services provided, reduce stress, and can have a positive impact on outcomes for students (Stevens, 2008; Wacek, 2017; Whitmore, 2017)
- School Social Workers can utilize and communicate knowledge of the Stages of Change Model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983) to other school personnel to foster reasonable expectations regarding how quickly progress will be made after interventions are implemented.

Promote a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence

- Regularly (perhaps once per semester) assess levels of compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. The [Professional Quality of Life Scale](#) is a recommended free instrument for School Social Workers.
- Dr. Jay Miller & Dr. Erlene Grise-Owens (2021) list a few interconnected concepts of what self-care is: individualized, integrated, intentional, structured, SMART, and sustained. Within each of these elements, Miller & Grise-Owens provide Social Workers with recommendations for self-care strategies to assist individuals on their journey. The traditional suggestions for individual self-care such as adequate rest and proper nutrition are examples of strategies that School Social Workers can use according to this model. At the [Social Work Today magazine](#) website, School Social Workers can find an extensive collection of articles about self-care including many self-care strategy options.
- Develop healthy boundaries and balance (Grise-Owens, 2019) Examples include choices such as:
 - Closing the office door while eating lunch;
 - Designing an end of the day ritual to firmly end the work day;
 - Using technology to complete work efficiently and avoid working additional hours unless necessary due to crisis situations;
 - Using technology to separate professional and personal life;
 - Limiting being on call, after the work day;
 - Assessing the necessity to work after hours, considering the safety of working in empty school buildings versus using a laptop and other technology tools to work from home.
 - Becoming comfortable with saying “no.” In interviews with Kate Jackson (2014), experts noted “That simple word - no - is both rare and powerful”. In the same article, Lisa Wesson shared that self-care means, “Saying yes when I mean yes and no when I mean no, and letting the chips fall where they may”, and that self-care involves “evolving out of being a people-pleaser and learning to set healthy boundaries to be better able to serve the greater good”. It is important to communicate boundaries for self-care to others and stick to those boundaries.
- Work with all school staff to foster a culture which emphasizes wellbeing for children, students and staff. Wellness is a multidimensional approach which includes medical,

emotional, environmental, occupational, physical, intellectual, spiritual, social, and financial components (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). When social workers feel like they have the skills, resources, and support to do their job well, they feel less stressed and are able to better meet the needs of their children, students and families (Staudt, 1997).

- Encourage social work interns to set boundaries, by modeling the behavior and formulate a self-care plan, using a free [Self-Care Plan Template](#).

Maximize access to school-based and community-based resources

- Consider accessing services through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or other providers when experiencing emotional distress. EAP programs reduce employee absenteeism, decrease anxiety at work and home, boost employee retention by feeling supported and are available 24/7 to staff (Schooley, 2021). An [NASW Social Works Talks Podcast episode](#) gives a brief, 10 minute overview of EAPs for School Social Workers who are not familiar with this mental health support option.
- Encourage other school personnel to access mental health services when needed. It is important that School Social Workers maintain awareness of community practitioners and agencies that provide mental health support and make referrals when appropriate, being careful not to enter into dual relationships such as becoming a therapist to a colleague.

Burnout will most likely be reduced by School Social Workers and School Social Worker supervisors and school administrators partnering to both recognize and address it. While School Social Workers must make it a priority to implement self-care individually, School Social Work supervisors and administrators are needed to address organizational barriers to self-care. As Agresta (2016) states, "Given that the education of a School Social Worker is both costly and time-consuming, it follows that retaining currently employed School Social Work professionals is critical.

SSWAA is proud to offer a network of professionals and tools to support your practice such as the above recommendations. Continue to access the SSWAA website, SSWAA professional development opportunities and SSWAA Board to meet your needs.

Additional Resources:

- [The Social Work Podcast](#) - Episode 130 covers the updated self-care wording in the 2021 amendments to the NASW Code of Ethics.
- [A Literature Review on Self-Care](#)

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