9 Steps to Prevent Social Service Provider Burnout

Implement these stress-fighting routines for better outcomes and better morale for your team.

Burnout is notoriously common across all the social services. The injustice, pain, and at-times seemingly hopelessness of the situation can quickly lead to exhaustion and depression. But this is also work that refuses to wait for staff to recover from their melancholy. What we learned from working with highly at-risk teams may help your organization find the path to prevent burnout before it happens.

1. Determine how stressed *are* your staff.

Passionate, committed people are especially at risk for burnout. And with that kind of personality, they may not exhibit many of the classic signs like unfinished tasks or moodiness – particularly to managers – until the situation is well advanced.

- Individuals can use the state-of-the-art Maslach Burnout Inventory online; administering it to a group requires a license, but may be well worth it to help a larger organization improve efficiency, morale, and client outcomes (you can also hire SPW to administer our adapted test for your team).
- Conduct a listening session with program managers about what they think is contributing to staff stress. Their knowledge and perspective is key to staff support.

2. Intervene after five months, when caseworkers are most susceptible. Aggregating our results over time, we've seen that burnout rates spike during the months 5 through 9 of employment, and tend to decrease after 24 months – a kind of "burnout bell curve" as people develop coping strategies.

- Check-in after 5 months on the job. Develop a tool for supervisors to assess staff and support them.
- Have training before 9 months that provides new skills and professional development.

3. Take care of managers, they are at special risk. The average score for staff members often falls in in the range of moderate risk for burnout, but the average score for managers is significantly higher, in the severe risk category. Managers also have crucial program knowledge and are the hardest to replace, so prioritize interventions for managers first, so that staff have strong models to emulate.

- Consult with managers to learn the specific factors causing their stress. Then, design a training tailored to managers' needs.

4. Be on your staff's side when they're dealing with difficult clients. Staff tend to feel that difficult clients make up a large part of their caseloads, contributing to their stress and burnout. Even though all may have had similar experiences, most felt isolated in dealing with their difficult clients and do not routinely discuss these cases with colleagues or supervisors in a constructive way.

- In case reviews, probing how clients made the caseworker feel can help staff learn to consider what the client has gone through.
- Encourage staff to create and adhere to end times of client appointments.
- Meet with "drop-in" clients, but only for five minutes to schedule an appointment.

5. Develop trusting relationships with staff. Managers can be a powerful resource for staff dealing with a resistant client or facing a wall of hopelessness, but only if there is a strong trust relationship. Managers need to develop techniques for helping staff while also trusting staff to do their best.

- Survey the staff: Is there effective communication? Do they feel they can speak openly? Does their manager make time to discuss difficult cases? Are staff meetings helping them feel supported?

6. Know your staffs' communication styles and empathy. A series of frustrating experiences with clients can set up expectations that all clients have lost interest in helping themselves and just have a sense of entitlement to services. That may well turn out to be correct at times – but paired with high stress levels, this leads to snap judgements and bias. What starts as a coping strategy and colleague bonding opportunity, soon diminishes the ability to feel empathy for clients and most effectively serve them.

- Include communication exercises in a tool kit to implement with staff annually.
- Encourage managers to be vigilant about staff bias as they do case supervisions.
- Encourage staff to talk to each other about difficult clients to gain a second perspective.

7. Help staff teach clients to help themselves. A chance for a client to talk to a landlord or potential employer often generates a feeling of "it's easier if I just called for them," or "they weren't going to call unless I did it." But doing the work for the client so the desired result happens (and the staff meets their metric) prevents clients from developing self-sustaining skills.

- Encourage staff to include clients in these kinds of communication so the client can observe, or even practice, skills needed for self-sufficiency later.
- Create tools to prepare clients for such encounters in ways that convey self-efficacy and optimism.
- Teach clients how to set up and use voicemails and explain phone call return polices (a call received in the am is returned by the pm; multiple messages do not improve the chances of a return call).

8. Find incentives that make staff feel valued. Highlight success stories and results to demonstrate impact. Staff must see that they are making a difference.

- Give rewards that encourage self-care such as a few hours of personal time or a team outing.
- Reward dedication with extra vacation, a staff development stipend or a learning opportunity.
- Honor them publicly at agency meetings.

9. Control morale and job satisfaction. Implement training and discussion around bias, communication styles, emotional vs. rational problem solving, resistance strategies, and coping with difficult clients.

- Add to staff quarterly reports what they are doing regarding team building, communication, stress management, expression of empathy, and self-efficacy.
- Develop best practices with administration for program operation and structure, including reasonable caseloads and setting more boundaries with clients.
- Help staff not take matters personally. It's hard; but it's key to helping others – and yourself.

Parting thought: Dealing with burnout-inducing situations builds team capacity for improving client outcomes. But finding ways to improve those outcomes is in itself a powerful tool for modifying the situations that lead to burnout.

Can we help your team? [Request a training] • [Contact us] for a consultation