

The mindful social worker: Living your best social work life

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Reviewed by Helen Stanley

The book outlines the current research into the impact of Mindfulness which is at the embryonic stage and explores how mindfulness can potentially provide a means of improving care for oneself as a social worker but also extend into practice to increase the efficacy of social work. The book acknowledges the many challenges of the social work role and one of its main aims is to offer the reader at times of difficulty; kindness, compassion, joy, and the need to take care of one self- whilst caring for others. It builds on established research from well-known sources such as Kinman et al (2020); professional knowledge and guidance about the relationship between mindfulness and the social work role which includes practice tools, case study reflections and self-assessments to facilitate any practitioner to incorporate it into their role to promote positive effect.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the historical origins of Mindfulness and the challenge of a shared definition of Mindfulness given its origins in the context of a path to enlightenment from Buddhism and Hinduism amongst other religious philosophies. It has transitioned from a way of achieving spiritual enlightenment towards a more secular practice which is familiar in the Western world. The growth of mindfulness can be linked back to the 1950s when more people were able to travel and links to the Eastern philosophy and meditation. It outlines that the practice became gained momentum in the 1970s when it was used an experimental treatment for psychological conditions. However, its sudden popularity in mainstream had prompted some scepticism from observers as it cannot be used to address all problems or place the sole responsibility for good health and wellbeing with the individual, diluting the duties of care which are the responsibility of organisations and governments.

Chapter 2 considers the multi facets of the social work role and the need to acknowledge that it can be demanding, rewarding, and challenging therefore it is essential that discussions about stress take place within the workplace. A survey by YouGov took place to find how social workers felt about their role and although the majority of the responses were positive, the same survey found a similar number of participants

reported stress as a key factor in their role. This is further compounded by the growth of managerialism in social work such as performance approaches. The distinct dynamics of social work can be complex to navigate and can lead to 'burn out or compassion fatigue'. The benefits of mindfulness and meditation are explored as a means of managing stress and a means of 'calming the mind and developing a kinder way of living that gives greater space for positivity, peace and well-being'. There is a recommendation that the mindful social worker can recognise stress, lean into, and manage their response wisely so increasing their ability to respond and not react.

There is some scientific evidence about the many benefits of mindfulness to support an individual to develop insight, kindness, cognitive abilities, and emotional regulation. The chapter includes a useful checklist for reflection on behaviours in the working day, a body scan exercise, a mindful approach application tool and a table to complete about six mindful support pillars for reflection.

Chapter 3 explores mindful communication and considers how the act of being present in the moment can enhance authentic connection, build more partnership working and promotes wellbeing. Practice examples are included as a useful illustration about the importance of the precision of language and a strengths-based approach to avoid any miscommunication which can happen when workers are facing many competing demands. It explores the benefits of workers allowing themselves micro mindful pauses, to achieve good communication which is the key to good social worker.

Chapter 4 considers the role that trusted relationships plays between social worker and service user, and with other professionals; so that honest and authentic relationships can be fostered to transcend the superficial. Further consideration is given to the importance of relationship-based practice in the context of the growth of managerialism and procedure driven social work. Mindfulness can be drawn on by the social worker so that their behaviour encourages trust which will lead to better interventions and a cohesive trusting cohesive network. Further exploration of the 'leap of faith' needed by the service user when they are vulnerable to place their trust and confidence in the good intentions of the social worker. Trust will only be developed in the social worker if they are deemed competent by service users and professionals, based on their skills, knowledge, and capability. Emphasis is placed on the importance of social workers working with reality not their own expectations based on previous experiences, so they have full awareness to view each

intervention individually and not react habitually. Practice examples are provided to illustrate the need for social workers to be fully aware of transference and counter transference.

Chapter 5 considers the role of assessment in social work and explores the benefits of a mindful social worker using tools and case examples. There is an argument for a person-centred approach so the social worker can remain professionally curious and remain present so they can weigh up when is most appropriate time for the analysis of the information they have gathered so they keep the focus on the individual and draw on skills and values of professional judgement, so the assessment is objective, fair and balanced. Social workers need to be culturally competent and have cultural humility so they are aware of their own cultural biases and values so they can apply mindfulness to avoid leaping to judgement formed from unconscious bias.

Chapter 6 explores how mindfulness has been introduced by corporate organisations such as Silicon Valley and Google to increase performance. It seems many companies such as the tech companies have recognised the benefits mindfulness can bring to the business world. This can inspire more creativity, so social workers can view things from different perspectives, which can generate new ideas and can inspire others. It examines how social workers can be faced with hostility and resistance and complex problems which require social workers to think creatively to solve these building on the strengths of the people they support. Mindfulness can be the bridge to creative thinking to avoid social workers slipping into habitual ways of thinking which can lead to process driven practice. Social workers can use their insight to solve problems which provides a good role model to service users, so they feel empowered to use insight and creativity to solve their own problems. This should include humility so when the social worker is in mediation or reflection they can allow time to process their feeling so they can include other perspectives.

Chapter 7 explores the benefits of the application of mindfulness to supervision which can be a complex process. This can be summarised by Davys and Beddoe (2020): 'Supervision can at very best allow, albeit briefly, the doors to be shut, the noise to be reduced and a quiet space for satisfying professional conversation,' The chapter looks at what good supervision constitutes, the Wonnacott (2012) four by four supervision model is considered and the need to give attention to all four elements not an over emphasis on the managerial or bureaucracy aspects which focuses on the organisational perfunctory requirements which can reduce

the supportive or developmental element for social workers which can lead to poor staff retention and poor practice. Practice examples such as a supervision contract is included to illustrate the importance of intent, awareness, critical reflection and gratitude so that authenticity is brought to supervision. Mindfulness can facilitate high quality supervision by establishing intent so both social worker and supervisee to navigate any challenges they encounter.

Chapter 8 concludes the mindful journey and summarises the transformational benefits of mindfulness practice and the many benefits including the need to overcome resistance, gain support from friends and an useful resource hut.

The book has a clear structure, a good balance of theory, research, practice examples, tools and take-home messages which summarise the key learning points. It clearly acknowledges the current context which social workers operate both at an economic and political level. It offers a practical approach and outlines the benefits of a mindful approach to all the key stakeholders including the social worker, service user and other professionals. It will be highly beneficial for practice teaching and is key learning for student and social workers at all levels. The only drawback is the lack of exploration of the Agency culture and the impact of this on social workers decision making and potential compassion fatigue.

The target audience is social work students, newly qualified social workers and experienced social workers including the caring profession.

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