

*Keeping safe and working effectively for social workers
and health professionals)*

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This book is an update of the 2013 first edition including more recent studies and new areas of concern such as social media. It focuses on harm and threats of harm to social workers and health professionals and actions that can be taken by individuals, supervisors, teams and organisations. This book review firstly gives an overview of the content and main themes covered within the book. Following this is a critique of the book and its relevance to practice learning and teaching for both social workers and health professionals. This includes strengths, limitations and its applicability for an international readership.

The context of harm for social workers and health professionals is initially explored. The prevalence of intimidation, threats and violence to social workers and other health professionals is outlined drawing on data from a range of surveys in the United Kingdom and USA. These highlight the higher risk for social workers and health professionals than the general population, of experiencing threats and assaults. Information from discussions with managers and staff in adult and child social care organisations identify both personal and professional impacts and emphasises variability with which issues of staff safety are managed in different organisations. The author identifies that violence and threats of violence impact the ability of professionals to make considered judgements and draws attention to the lack of recognition this has received in safeguarding reviews.

Later chapters address physiological and psychological responses to sudden and unexpected emotional or physical threats and longer-term intimidation, as 'automatic and virtually uncontrollable' (Atkins 2023 p.18) and impacting on professionals' ability to make decisions to safeguard children or vulnerable adults. The possibility of secondary trauma for workers, particularly where the work environment is not supportive, is suggested. The term 'hostage theory', derived from Stockholm Syndrome (Martin 2011) explains possible responses to working in situations where there is violence or the threat of violence. These include minimisation of threats to the worker, and also to those

in need of protection, through reality distortion or by avoiding contact with the abuser.

Actions professionals can take to keep themselves safe in various locations are explored and the responsibilities of employers, and measures that teams and supervisors can take are addressed. Despite precautions being taken, health and social work professionals may find themselves subjected to, or threatened with, violence and aggression. Atkins (2023) explores the phases of emotional arousal underlying aggressive responses to help the reader understand when intervention may be helpful and when it should be avoided to avoid escalation, with a focus on understanding how a worker's behaviour can affect situations. De-escalation techniques and assertive approaches to aggression are outlined as well as reminders about safety. Further techniques are suggested for working with families who resist intervention from professionals, drawing on strength-based approaches. The final chapters explore institutional issues, firstly where employing organisations are not responsive to the issues and then considering how individual and team performance can be impacted by the stress and anxiety of working with violence, aggression and intimidation.

This book is a practical, readable resource which could benefit many professions to understand aggressive behaviours and the impact on the worker. Teaching students about how to keep safe in their practice should not wait until they encounter difficult situations. The strengths of this book are in considering violence and aggression from different perspectives, and the parts addressed to supervisors are likely to be of particular benefit to practice educators. The section on when and how to de-escalate tension and aggression and the reminder that the only behaviour we can control is our own are useful for students and qualified workers alike and could form the basis for interprofessional training.

I would have liked to see more references to the sources of concepts and theories included so that further reading could be undertaken. There are also some inaccuracies regarding social work regulation in England which have not been updated for this new edition. In two places it states that the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) regulates social workers in England, although this has not been the case since Social Work England took over this responsibility in December 2019. A glossary of terms and organisations would be a useful addition.

The book is addressed to both social workers and health professionals

but draws more explicitly from social work with children and families. It also is predominantly UK focused, but this should not detract from the majority of the content being useful for other professions and for an international readership.

References

Martin, G. (2011) Stockholm syndrome. In G. Martin (Ed.) *The SAGE encyclopedia of terrorism* (2 ed., pp. 562-562). SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412980173>

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