

Six Steps to Sustaining a Satisfying Social Work Career

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All too often we hear of social workers who are tired, discouraged, distressed or burnt out and decide to leave our profession. Such stories led us to wonder: *What are the personal attitudes and behaviours that contribute to satisfying social work practice? What preparation and continuing personal adaptations are needed to sustain motivation, energy and engagement over the years and decades that make up a career?* Looking back with a long view, and drawing on our combined eighty-plus years of practice along with input from colleagues, we offer six suggestions for remaining engaged, invigorated and satisfied throughout your social work career.

But before we begin two truths are best faced head-on:

First, becoming a social worker involves diving into an ocean of trouble, descending into the darkest parts of human experience. Hearing, for example, the anger and pain of a couple struggling with one partner's relapse to alcohol use. Managing one's own fear when facing a parent's volatile hostility and angry threats during a late-night emergency child welfare home visit where a child is in a dangerous situation. Being with a young woman who is reliving the horror of a past sexual abuse. Seeing the bruises and broken drywall during a home visit, the hard evidence of spousal violence. Observing the reality of poverty in a mental health follow-up visit. Experiencing the tension in an interdisciplinary meeting where the team disagrees about how to treat a teenager. Meeting with parents in the ER who have learned, moments earlier, that their only child is dead, killed in a car accident. The anger that wells up when your supervisor concludes that a client's housing crisis "is not our business". Recognizing the anguish in a young woman's eyes as she tells you, from her hospital bed, that she will not live to see her children start school. Social work draws us to the brink of life's challenges. To paraphrase James Rebanks, (p. 167) being a social worker is a rough business. We've bought a ticket for the front row seat.

Second, context *always* matters. Our workplace organizations can sustain our practice or they can be another source of trouble. Adequate staffing, appropriate pay, respectful relationships, arrangements for breaks from distressing experience, and empathic, growth-oriented supervision all contribute to a satisfying social work career. That means a carefully

developed collective agreement will frequently be foundational to our experience as social workers. Opting for independent practice *may* be a protective factor, but nothing frees us from the need for collaborative, supportive relationships and workplace processes.

Given that we're diving into a sea of trouble and need a well-designed, well-coordinated workplace, what personal attitudes and behaviours are demanded of us if we are to enjoy a satisfying social work career? In our view there are six essential elements.

First. **Work on being a well-differentiated self.** When it comes down to it, the most important ingredient in social work practice, to use the words of Mr. Fred Rogers, "is our honest selves". *Who* we are matters and *knowing* who we are matters just as much. Bringing an observant, thoughtful, responsive presence to the work surely involves both humility and confidence. "There is an old Hasidic belief regarding parenting: parents should raise children to give them the sense that in one pocket is a slip of paper that says "for my sake, and my sake alone, the world was created" and in the other pocket is a slip of paper that says "I am but a grain of sand". (Fishman, p. 166) This is also good advice for social workers.

Second. **Own a theory of human social behaviour.** Social work is premised on the notion of person in society. Our professional practice requires us to assess symptoms and situations, develop strategies for intervention and evaluate outcomes. Failure to be grounded in a theory, like embarking on a trip without a map, will be a source of distress. As social workers, our job is to identify how social systems and relationships influence behavior. We need the knowledge and skill to effectively intervene in these systems. We've found, during our careers, a theoretical home with Bowen Family Systems Theory and a set of concepts that describe how humans are connected to each other and part of evolution and the natural world. One of our colleagues described this ownership as having a genuine and competent interest in entering the historical and contextual worlds of those we serve. Others spoke of owning a set of critical thinking skills; of how a recognition of systems provides perspective; and the importance of a knowledge base that recognizes our relational existence. A theory guides questions, organizes what we can see, allows us to predict what will happen next, and helps us make sense of the chaotic seas of troubles that are our business. A solid theoretical framework places us on clearer footing in interdisciplinary interactions. The absence of a theory...or for that matter juggling a hodgepodge of theories...tugs us into chaos, uncertainty, doubt and despair. Owning a theory allows us to position ourselves effectively, helping us address the anxious systems we serve. A theory gives us the confidence to know the next steps to take and the satisfaction that comes from that knowledge.

Third: **Develop a sense of agency, practice skills and confidence.** Knowledge and owning a theory, while vital, are not enough; social work is about *doing things* in collaboration with other people. Our work is to invite others to engage in difficult collaborative tasks. We need a high level of comfort in leading assessment processes, in planning interventions, and in the delivery of a range of programs and services. We are expected to be skilled members of interdisciplinary teams. The *other people* mentioned above is a large and diverse group. They include colleagues, individuals, families, client groups, volunteers, board and committee members, supervisors, educators, citizens and public officials whose being and experience cross cultures, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and ability. Swimming in the sea

of trouble demands a confidence and courage that comes, a colleague pointed out, from learning and honing a range of practice skills that are at our disposal in a diversity of highly charged environments. Other colleagues spoke of the sense of satisfaction that comes from the ability to establish meaningful relationships and the capacity to facilitate a crisis situation. Doing social work demands a solid grasp of human social behaviour and a deep and genuine concern for our fellow beings. It also calls on our capacity to translate our concern and our knowledge into skilled practice.

Fourth: **Adopt practices for escape and self-renewal.** Satisfaction over the long-term won't, paradoxically, be achieved with tenacity. On the contrary, it's necessary to escape from the tension, stress, trauma and despair that are characteristic of the sea of trouble into which we've purposefully plunged. We need regular and routine havens and it's important that these efforts don't add to the pressure. Alcohol, other drugs, visits to the casino, shopping, and junk food may each have their place, but also come with warning labels and must be handled with care. Social workers need escapes that are investments in self-renewal. Jim has used reading, gardening, walking and volunteer activities as time for reflection, to learn and to create breaks from the demands of professional practice. Anne enjoys walks, music and has avocational interests in storytelling (Godly Play), and the joy of grandparenting little ones. Colleagues spoke of practices like yoga, being in the natural world, engaging in a spiritual life, meditation, protecting break times, and leaving work on time as helpful pathways to renewal. Whether it's long-distance running, watercolour painting, sport, learning a new language, prayer, or helping out in a fundraising campaign, the good news about regeneration is that methods abound. Many years ago, reality therapy psychiatrist William Glasser suggested that habitually engaging in activities like running, meditation, or hitting a knot on a rope with a baseball bat were pathways to satisfying and successful lives. Dr. Glasser was onto something. To enjoy a satisfying social work career, it is critical to regularly escape and to frequently and routinely mix things up.

Fifth: **Develop meaningful person-to-person relationships.** That idea about the *person in society*, the idea that shapes social work, applies to *us* too. Each of us, like those we serve, are individuals closely and broadly connected to other individuals and groups of people. Some of those connections are supportive and some are hurtful and likely some are dormant. Our capacity to sustain focus and commitment to the demanding and important work we've taken on requires being on active adult-to-adult terms with members of our nuclear and extended families, with colleagues and clients and supervisors. As one colleague put it, this involves striving to engage others on an equal footing. It is certainly an asset to be on active good terms with our professional associations and to always be on the look-out for the *adults in the room*, those others who seem to understand how to navigate in the seas of trouble. For example, mentors, supervisors or colleagues can be key supports in each stage of our careers by helping us reflect on our professional functioning. Meaningful relationships are those that allow us to share important parts of ourselves, that respect important boundaries, that provide us with honest feedback even when it is hard to hear. Colleagues who shared their understanding of what it takes to sustain satisfaction with a social work career spoke of the empowerment that comes from being loved and valued; the importance of collaborative practice with interdisciplinary colleagues; and connecting deeply with colleagues, clients, community...of having a confidant.

Sixth: **Embrace curiosity.** Our function as social workers involves learning as much as we can about others, their relationships and the worlds of meaning they inhabit. It also requires that we be curious about ourselves and our own functioning. How else can we assess a situation, consider our own biases, or discover a plan for change? We *need* to know. Embracing curiosity, the desire to deeply understand ourselves and our clients lives and relationships may be both a form of love and an aspect of our own survival. Colleagues spoke of exploring the lives of others with a genuine and competent interest; with a willingness to listen without any preconceived ideas; of the privilege of hearing people's stories. Curiosity, said another, is key. And what accompanies this curiosity, is the need for a deep humility that comes from the limitations of our capacity to understand; as one colleague put it, the ability to remind oneself, every few minutes, that each bit of knowledge is transient. "Curiosity may have killed the cat...", wrote poet Alastair Reid. But what the cat knows is "...that hell is where to live, they have to go." And it might be helpful to remind ourselves that "everything that irritates us about others can lead to an understanding of ourselves" (Jung) and that "not all those who wander are lost." (Tolkien, p. 182) We need to embrace our curiosity. Our work and our well-being depend upon it.

So, remaining optimistic and satisfied throughout a social work career is simple. First, accept that we will be immersed in seas of trouble and second, hope for a wonderful workplace environment. And then take the next six steps. Become fully who you are; adopt a theory of human social behaviour; master practice skills that match your theory and workplace demands; make positive escape and self-care habitual; build a set of meaningful relationships; all the while embracing your curiosity and the excitement of learning about yourself and those you serve. *Easy peasy* as a colleague sometimes says.

But of course, it isn't easy. It's a promise of a lifetime of effort, a never-ending exercise of professional and personal development. Social work, as J.S. Woodsworth (Lewis, p.76) put it in another context, will "assure you plenty of hard work and more or less uncertainty, but at the same time, a great opportunity to wake up and organize..." this world we inhabit.

And the suggestions that matter most, as social workers know so well, aren't ours. They are yours. How would you answer our questions? *What are the personal attitudes and behaviours that contribute to satisfying social work practice? What preparation and continuing personal adaptations are needed to sustain motivation, energy and engagement over the years and decades that make up a career?* We are already curious to learn what you think.

References:

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