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Hope and Resilience

Social work is a profession that is based on hope. It is the capacity to hope that enables social workers to work with people and communities that have experienced life events such as loss, abuse, or trauma. As social workers who are Christians, we are sustained by our hope in Christ that tells us we can wade into seemingly hopeless situations because God is present in the midst of the suffering of us all. We can envision the possibility of healing and restoration of broken relationships and righting injustices.

In social work, there has been an increasing focus on resilience, which is the ability to grow and flourish in the midst of adversity. Related to resilience is the concept of post-traumatic growth that individuals or groups can experience as a result of a struggle with a traumatic life event. What is now being recognized and affirmed is that personal faith and communities of faith can be sources of strength and healing that help people to flourish. As reflected in the research of Brene Brown (2010), "...without exception, spirituality—the belief in connection, a power greater than self, and interconnections grounded in love and compassion—emerged as a component of resilience" (p. 64). These "interconnections" of faith can be expanded to

include the way faith is lived out with characteristics such as hope, forgiveness, and gratitude.

When a social worker comes face to face with pain and suffering, how do hope and resilience play a part?

Two social workers met with a group of members from a Black church who experienced the loss of a loved one in a devastating flood from a hurricane. One member, Mr. Thomas, said he walks by a nearby lake to feel close to his son who drowned. It is a place where he feels more at peace. He was hesitant to mention this to the rest of the group, because going near water might bring back bad memories for them. Yet, another member of the group, Ms. Smith., responded that she struggles when there is a hard rainstorm, but hearing him gives her hope that it won't always be like this. . . the Lord will see her through. One of the social workers affirmed there are different ways of grieving and finding peace.

The group session was taking place in a Black church with a historical tradition of supporting individual and community resilience in the midst of oppressive conditions. This provided a safe space to process pain. Ms. Smith sees God as a dependable source of strength and hope in the midst of traumatic loss and uncertainty. Mr. Thomas slowly found ways to connect with the memory of his son and to reframe his image of water.

Exploring a clients' faith practices, such as Bible reading and prayer, can help people reframe their experiences in a way that gives hope for the future. Building resilience is a relational process that can include the support of faith communities and healing rituals. These spiritual practices are being increasingly recognized as a source of resilience in social work practice (Campbell et al, 2021).

Understanding the meaning of faith for a person is an important part of the helping process. Sometimes faith is a resource for healing. At other times, faith is a source of distress, condemnation, or worthlessness. A client may feel far from

God or judged by their congregation. Someone else might be left with anger at why God let them suffer and a sense of hopelessness for the future.

To understand resilience, it can be helpful to consider what it is not. Resilience is not about bouncing back to where you were previously. It also is not one size fits all or about enduring painful life events. Ms. Smith is in a different place in her grief process than other group members in finding meaning in what happened to her and her family. The good news is that hope and resilience can be learned, which seemed to be unfolding for both of the group members. People who experience adversity are much more than their wounds and hurts.

Resilience is not just for clients, but also for us. If we are going to cope effectively with challenging situations, we are going to need to build resilience. We can do this by nurturing healthy support systems, reframing negative thought processes, and fostering nourishing self-care practices. Supervision is one support that should not be overlooked. While friends and family are invaluable, having a confidential, safe space to discuss triggers, challenges, doubts, fears, next steps, and even successes is important in our journey as resilient social work professionals.

Self-care involves all aspects of who we are from our relationships, thoughts, physical and emotional health, and our spirituality. According to Collins (2005) "Self-care is a spiritual act. It is an integral part of multiple aspects of a person's life, including health and wellness" (p. 264). Collins reminds us that while we all have stressors, feeling stressed does not have to be a way of life. Poorly managed lives of stress can lead to emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences. She encourages fighting against these in several ways including keeping the Sabbath and finding rest as a way to recharge. She also focuses on gratitude as a resource. Appreciating our daily benefits and blessings both builds resilience and is important to our self-care.

Self-care requires us to create a balanced life from which we do not feel the need to escape, but one in which we can stay fully present and invested. There can be challenges as we practice social work, both with our clients and in the organizations where we work. These realities are even more reason for radical self-care. This may mean we have to say “no” from time to time, walk away from opportunities, and make difficult decisions to protect and uphold our rest and well-being. Self-care practices were important for the social workers who worked with the group as they were hearing painful stories of loss. They had the support of one another and the Pastor. They were not alone and had a sense of purpose and found meaning in the work even when it was hard. Developing self-compassion can similarly help us maintain compassionate hearts of service to others as we steward our knowledge, skills, and gifts in meaningful ways (Collins, 2005).

References

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Social Work and Witnessing

Christians, coming from a place of love, may naturally want to share their experience of knowing Christ. They may be convinced that, if only their client would “accept” Christ, their troubles would be lightened and, more importantly, they would inherit eternal life. Therefore, the strong desire to tell the Christian story and encourage others to believe it, is understandable. It is more questionable when it takes the form of trying to convert people to a particular way to believe, such as based on a denomination or sect.

Why then should a Christian social worker not witness and be an advocate for faith by urging their clients to become Christians? The answer lies in part in the role and purpose of a social worker and in people’s right to choose their belief system or to even not have a belief system. Yet, the answer also lies in the nature of faith itself.

Faith is not something that one acquires just because someone tells them they ought to have it. First, they have to have faith in that person. Second, what they are asked to have faith in must make some sense in the light of their own experience. Most people have heard about God. Yet many of the people with whom social work is largely engaged have no reason to believe in God. Why should they? How, in fact, can they?