BIO-PSYCHO-SOCIAL RISKS AND RESILIENCE IN THE WORKPLACE AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS

ANNA ÁRPOVÁ[1]

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[1] Institute of Missionary and Charitable Work and Tropical Medicine of St. John Paul II, Bratislava
St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work. n. o.,
Bratislava,
Slovakia

Contact: Assoc.prof. PhDr. Anna Árpová, PhD., MBA., MPH - araneta5@gmail.coml

Abstract:

The work of social workers has long been associated with a high risk of professional burnout, psychological strain, and exposure to various stressors stemming from the demanding nature of client interactions, organizational settings, and societal expectations. The aim of this paper is to identify and analyze the bio-psycho-social risks that social workers face in the workplace, while also exploring the concept of resilience as a key protective factor against these risks. In the biological domain, we focus primarily on physical exhaustion and psychosomatic manifestations; on the psychological level, we analyze stress, emotional exhaustion, and mental resilience; and in the social sphere, we examine interpersonal relationships, support within the work collective, and the social recognition of the profession. The study also highlights the significance of resilience as a dynamic process that helps individuals cope with challenging situations and adapt to stress. In conclusion, we propose recommendations for supporting the mental health and resilience of social workers, including preventive interventions, supervision, and the creation of a supportive work environment.

Keywords: Bio-psycho-social risks, stress, burnout syndrome, resilience, interpersonal relationships, intervention, supervision.

Introduction

The profession of social work is among those with high demands on psychological, physical, and social resilience. Daily contact with vulnerable groups, crisis management, time pressure, lack of resources, and emotionally demanding cases represent a set of factors that may negatively affect the overall health and well-being of social service workers. These factors often overlap, creating complex bio-psycho-social risks that can lead to stress, burnout, anxiety, or deterioration of interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

In this context, the concept of resilience—an individual's ability to cope with stress, adapt to difficult conditions, and recover from adverse experiences—is gaining increasing importance. Resilience in the context of social work is not only an individual trait but also the result of an interaction between the worker's personality, the work environment, and the broader social context.

The aim of this paper is to examine the bio-psycho-social risk factors that influence the job performance and mental health of social workers, while also emphasizing the importance of resilience as a preventive and strengthening mechanism in both professional and personal life.

The Bio-Psycho-Social Model in the Context of Workload

The bio-psycho-social model represents a multidimensional approach to understanding health and illness, integrating biological, psychological, and social factors (Engel, 1977). This model finds application not only in medicine and psychology but also in assessing workload, particularly in helping professions where employees regularly encounter complex stressful situations. Social workers, in the course of their professional duties, are exposed to multiple types of strain that overlap and affect their overall functioning.

The biological component of workload manifests primarily in physical symptoms resulting from long-term stress. These include fatigue, sleep disturbances, headaches, muscle tension, or increased susceptibility to illness. According to Maslach and Leiter (2008), chronic workplace stress leads to physical exhaustion, which is one of the main components of burnout syndrome.

Among social workers, these symptoms are often neglected, leading to the long-term deterioration of their health (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001; Šimková, Šimek, 2025).

The psychological dimension involves emotional and cognitive responses to demanding working conditions, such as stress, frustration, feelings of helplessness, or reduced self-efficacy. Social workers often face so-called *"emotional labor"* (Hochschild, 1983), when they must regulate their own emotions in the interest of the client, thereby increasing their psychological burden. Prolonged exposure to this type of strain may lead to emotional exhaustion and disruption of mental balance (Figley, 1995). Furthermore, a low degree of control over the outcomes of their work increases the risk of feelings of futility and demotivation (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

The social dimension relates to interpersonal relationships in the workplace, teamwork, managerial support, and societal recognition of the profession. Research has shown that the absence of social support is one of the key factors contributing to stress and burnout among helping professionals (Cherniss, 1995). Conversely, strong team cohesion and quality supervisory leadership serve as protective factors that support workers' resilience (McCann et al., 2013).

Bio-Psycho-Social Risks in the Work of Social Workers

The work of a social worker is one of the most demanding professions in the helping fields, as it requires constant contact with people in crisis situations, a high degree of empathy, emotional involvement, and the ability to cope with stress. From the perspective of the bio-psycho-social model, social workers are exposed to risks on several levels—biological, psychological, and social—that often overlap and cumulatively increase the likelihood of developing burnout syndrome, mental disorders, or deteriorating physical health (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Šimek, 2025).

Biological Risks

Biological risks in the work of social workers are primarily associated with physical exhaustion, irregular work schedules, and psychosomatic manifestations of chronic stress. Long-term exposure to stressful situations activates the body's stress response, which may result in sleep disturbances, high blood pressure,

digestive problems, or weakened immunity (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). These physical symptoms are often downplayed or overlooked, increasing the risk of long-term health complications.

Psychological Risks

The most prominent set of risks manifests on the psychological level. Social workers face high emotional demands stemming from working with traumatized clients, resolving ethical dilemmas, and frequently experiencing helplessness due to limited options for assistance. This can result in chronic stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms, secondary traumatization, or burnout syndrome (Figley, 2002; Bride, 2007). Numerous studies show that emotional exhaustion is one of the most significant aspects of psychological overload in social work (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Moreover, the constant need to regulate one's emotions may lead to so-called *emotional dissonance*, which reduces psychological resilience and increases the risk of burnout (Hochschild, 1983).

Social Risks

The social dimension of risks is just as significant as the biological and psychological ones. It includes factors such as insufficient recognition of the profession, low financial compensation, weak support from supervisors and colleagues, or interpersonal conflicts. Social workers often feel a lack of social prestige and recognition, which leads to frustration and decreased work motivation (Cherniss, 1995). In addition, the absence of quality supervision and teamwork may worsen a worker's ability to cope effectively with stress (McCann et al., 2013). Social isolation, insufficient sharing of burdens, and the feeling of loneliness in decision-making significantly contribute to psychological exhaustion and professional burnout.

Resilience as a Protective Factor and Its Significance

Resilience represents an individual's ability to adapt to adverse conditions, withstand stress, and recover after experiencing difficult life situations (Masten, 2001). In the context of helping professions such as social work, this concept is of particular importance, as workers are frequently exposed to stress, emotional

exhaustion, and high workloads. Resilience functions as a protective factor that mitigates the negative impacts of stressors and contributes to maintaining mental health and professional performance (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000).

Definition and Components of Resilience

Resilience is not a fixed personality trait but a dynamic process that involves the ability to effectively manage stress, utilize internal and external resources of support, maintain flexibility in thinking, and learn from difficult experiences (Windle, 2011). Key factors contributing to the development of resilience include positive coping strategies, self-confidence, a sense of humor, the ability to build and maintain supportive relationships, and active problem-solving (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

The Importance of Resilience in the Work of Social Workers

Social workers often encounter secondary traumatization, frustration stemming from the impossibility of systemic change, and emotional exhaustion (Figley, 1995; Bride, 2007). Resilience enables them to maintain emotional balance, preserve professional boundaries, and at the same time retain empathy toward clients. Research shows that higher levels of resilience are associated with lower levels of burnout syndrome and greater psychological well-being (McCann et al., 2013; Kinman & Grant, 2011).

It has also been shown that resilience can be supported not only on an individual level but also at the organizational level. Supervision, quality work relationships, opportunities for professional growth, and recognition from supervisors create an environment that strengthens workers' adaptive capacities (Grant & Kinman, 2014). Therefore, it is important for employers in social services to focus not only on stress prevention but also on the active development of resilience as an integral part of professional growth.

Developing Resilience

The development of resilience can be supported through various interventions: educational programs focused on stress management, the cultivation of positive

thinking, mindfulness training, group interventions, and supervision meetings (Robertson et al., 2016). Support for self-reflection and the ability to name and process difficult emotions also play a significant role. These skills increase inner stability and enable workers to better cope with strain.

Strategic Approaches to Strengthening Resilience

Resilience, understood as the ability to cope with stress, adapt to challenging situations, and recover from adverse experiences (Masten, 2001), is a key protective factor, particularly in professions with high emotional demands. Social work belongs among such professions, where workers are daily exposed to difficult decisions, emotionally charged interactions with clients, and systemic limitations. Therefore, the strategic development and support of resilience are essential not only for the health and well-being of workers but also for the quality of services provided. There are several proven approaches that can be systematically applied at both the individual and organizational levels.

1. Individual Strategies for Developing Resilience

At the individual level, stress management skills (coping), self-regulation, positive thinking, the development of emotional intelligence, and the promotion of mental well-being play a key role (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). Effective individual strategies include mindfulness, which helps reduce stress levels, increases self-reflection, and fosters conscious responses to strain (Gillespie et al., 2007). Another important element is the development of self-awareness—the ability to identify one's own limits and needs—which reduces the risk of burnout (Kinman & Grant, 2011).

Physical activity, sufficient sleep, healthy lifestyle habits, and the building of supportive social networks (family, friends, colleagues) are also among the fundamental pillars of individual resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Equally important is an active attitude toward problems—that is, the ability to seek solutions rather than resign—as well as the capacity to find meaning even in difficult situations (Frankl, 2006).

2. Organizational Strategies for Strengthening Resilience

Effective support for resilience is not only a matter of the individual—the organizational context is also of crucial importance. A work environment that supports mental health, allows open communication, provides opportunities for professional growth, and respects employees' needs significantly contributes to higher levels of resilience (Grant & Kinman, 2014).

The basic organizational strategies include:

- **Quality supervision** – regular reflection on cases and emotionally demanding situations helps workers process stress and seek effective solutions (Beddoe, 2010).
- **Educational programs aimed at developing resilience** – workshops and training focused on stress management, communication, self-regulation, and building resilience (Robertson et al., 2015).
- **Support for teamwork and collegial support** – team cohesion and sharing of burdens reduce the sense of isolation and strengthen emotional stability (McCann et al., 2013).
- **Work flexibility** – the ability to adjust working hours or workload, particularly in the case of long-term stress or exhaustion (Cooper et al., 2020).
- **Recognition and appreciation of work** – a culture that values the work of social workers increases their sense of worth and motivation (Leiter & Maslach, 2004).

3. Systemic Support and a Resilience-Oriented Culture

Organizations that want to strengthen the resilience of their employees in the long term must create a so-called resilience culture—a systemic approach in which resilience and mental well-being are considered part of organizational strategy. This includes risk assessments, monitoring of workload indicators, implementing preventive measures, and creating structures that enable a safe and supportive work environment (Cooper, Flint-Taylor & Pearn, 2013).

Supporting Mental Health and Preventing Risks in Social Work

Social work is a profession that requires high emotional commitment, the ability to operate in uncertain conditions, and frequent exposure to stressful situations.

As a result, social workers are at increased risk of mental health problems such as anxiety disorders, depression, burnout, or secondary traumatization (Bride, 2007; Figley, 1995). Maintaining mental health in this profession is therefore not only an individual challenge but also a professional and organizational responsibility. Effective mental health support must include systematic risk prevention and the building of a resilient work environment.

Supporting Mental Health at the Individual Level

At the individual level, it is important to strengthen self-reflection, self-awareness, and coping strategies that help regulate stress. Effective techniques include mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral stress management techniques, mental hygiene, physical activity, and building supportive relationships (Gillespie et al., 2007; Robertson et al., 2015). Training workers in the area of mental health and developing emotional intelligence, which helps respond effectively to stressful situations, also play a significant role (Grant & Kinman, 2014).

Organizational and Systemic Approaches

The work environment is also of crucial importance, as it can either support or undermine employees' mental health. Organizations that recognize the importance of mental health implement preventive measures such as:

- **Regular supervision**, where workers have the opportunity to reflect on their work and process challenging cases (Beddoe, 2010),
- **Team support and interdisciplinary cooperation**, which reduce isolation and increase the sense of belonging,
- **Work flexibility**, allowing working conditions to be adapted to individual needs,
- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)**, offering counseling, psychological help, or crisis support (Cooper et al., 2020).

Equally important is a culture of openness and destigmatization, which allows workers to talk about psychological exhaustion without fear of stigma or professional disadvantage (Leiter & Maslach, 2004).

Prevention as a Long-Term Strategy

The prevention of psychological overload must be integrated into the strategic management of organizations. This includes risk monitoring, regular evaluation of employee satisfaction and workload, as well as supporting resilience through training and the development of personal skills (McCann et al., 2013). Prevention should not be seen as a one-time intervention but as a long-term and sustainable process that supports well-being, satisfaction, and performance.

Prevention in the field of mental health is increasingly perceived as a key element of the strategic approach to protecting individuals' psychological well-being, particularly in professions with high exposure to stress factors, such as social work. While traditional approaches often responded only after psychological difficulties had already arisen, current knowledge highlights the need for systematic, early, and long-term prevention that not only reduces the risk of mental disorders but also promotes a healthy work environment and professional sustainability (WHO, 2013).

Prevention as More than a One-Time Intervention

Mental health prevention should not be understood as a one-time measure, such as a lecture on stress or a single workshop, but rather as an integrated, long-term, and continuous process that is firmly embedded in organizational culture and everyday practice.

Key Elements of a Long-Term Preventive Strategy

- **Education and Awareness** - The foundation of prevention lies in raising awareness about the importance of mental health. Regular training, workshops, information campaigns, and courses focused on recognizing stress, burnout, and other risks increase self-reflection and the ability to intervene in a timely manner (Robertson et al., 2015).

1. **Culture of Openness and Psychological Safety** - Organizational culture should promote open dialogue about mental health without stigma. Employees should feel safe sharing their difficulties and know that they will be provided with support without fear of judgment or sanctions (Leiter & Maslach, 2004).
2. **Regular Supervision and Reflection** - Supervision is not only a control tool

but also a space for processing emotionally demanding situations, supporting decision-making, and fostering professional growth. Long-term and consistent supervision reduces the risk of burnout and increases workers' resilience (Beddoe, 2010).

3. **Accessibility of Support Services** - Preventive strategies should also include accessible psychological counseling services or Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which ensure timely access to professionals when needed (Cooper et al., 2020).
4. **Organizational Measures** - These include flexible working arrangements, reasonable distribution of workload, employee involvement in decision-making processes, regular assessment of workplace risks, and the consistent application of equality and respect policies (LaMontagne et al., 2014).

Long-Term Benefits of Prevention

Investing in prevention brings not only a reduction in the prevalence of mental health disorders but also increased job satisfaction, productivity, employee loyalty, and reduced turnover. Research shows that well-designed preventive programs can lower costs related to absenteeism and improve the overall organizational climate (Harvey et al., 2017). In social work, where exhaustion is a frequent phenomenon, such a strategic approach is nothing less than essential.

Conclusion

The use of the bio-psycho-social model in practice makes it possible to identify the various levels of risk faced by social workers and to design integrated interventions to support their health and performance. Effective prevention of work overload should include physical care for employees (e.g., regular breaks, ergonomic environment), psychological support (e.g., supervision, stress management training), and social interventions (e.g., improving work relationships, recognition of the profession).

Social workers face a wide range of bio-psycho-social risks that have a significant impact on their health, performance, and overall quality of life. Identifying these risks is essential for developing effective preventive strategies that promote resilience among workers and increase their ability to cope with stress. It is precisely the bio-psycho-social approach that enables a comprehensive understanding of these risks and the development of integrated interventions at

both the individual and organizational levels.

Resilience is an essential tool for coping with the demands faced by social workers. As a dynamic protective factor, it influences not only personal well-being but also the quality of services provided. It is therefore important to create a work environment that strengthens resilience and promotes a culture of mental health. Investing in the development of resilience is not only a way to prevent burnout, but also a way to retain motivated and resilient professionals in a demanding but socially important profession.

Mental health prevention as a long-term strategy is an integral part of quality management in

the helping professions. Its goal is not just to "put out fires," but to actively shape an environment in which workers feel safe, respected, and supported. A long-term approach to prevention is also an investment in the sustainability of the profession, employee satisfaction, and the quality of services provided.

Overall, mental health promotion and risk prevention in social work require a coordinated approach at several levels – individual, organizational, and systemic. Protecting mental health is not only the personal responsibility of the social worker, but also a professional and ethical duty of the employer. Creating a supportive environment that respects limits, strengthens resilience, and allows for open dialogue about mental stress is the basis for high-quality and sustainable social work.

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