

SELECTED ASPECTS OF SELF-CARE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

MARIANA HAMAROVÁ¹, ZUZANA BUDAYOVÁ²

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59505/IRHNS.22352007.2025.3.01>

¹ Catholic University in Ružomberok,
Faculty of Theology,
Theological Institute in Spišské Podhradie,
Slovakia

² Catholic University in Ružomberok,
Faculty of Theology,
Theological Institute in Spišské Podhradie,
Slovakia

Contact: Mgr. Mariana Hamarová - hamarova.mariana@gmail.com;
doc. PhDr. Mgr., Zuzana Budayová, PhD., M.Ed. - zuzana.budayova@ku.sk

Abstract:

Intrinsic motivation for social work needs to be strengthened much more nowadays than in the past. An example is the Daughters of Charity, who drew their motivation from their formation, their spiritual motivation, a systematic spiritual life, and self-care that had spiritual foundations and depth. The principles of self-care and self-relationship, which influence motivation to help others, have an important position in working life. After completing the intervention program in the implemented research, it is important for social workers working in the non-profit sector and state administration to work on improving self-care through selected aspects in their daily and working lives. These aspects result from exercises through the principles of gestalt therapy and person-centred therapy. The principles of the aforementioned therapies can be beneficial for the area

of self-development, self-acceptance, and self-awareness of social workers. Intervention programs should include self-care competencies in the daily practice of the professional and personal lives of social workers.

Keywords: Self-care. Social work. Intrinsic motivation. Therapy.

Introduction

Charity can be generally defined as merciful love for another person, the foundations of which are in the practical application of Christian principles. It focuses on a person in need and helps him to eliminate his problems according to the example of the Good Samaritan. It emphasizes respect and honour for the dignity of every person, who is the image of God, and also on compassion, humanity, kindness and selflessness, which are important when caring for him. These attributes are in line with the attitudes and actions of the Daughters of Charity, who were formed by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, important figures in the foundations of charitable activity. Both were aware of the material and spiritual poverty of the period in which they lived. For them, every person had a unique value and dignity. They put compassion, mercy and the needs of every poor or sick person at the forefront, whom they also tried to lead to self-realization, according to their capabilities. They approached each person with respect, unconditional acceptance, empathy and active listening - similar to current modern therapeutic approaches, although they were not aware of it. At the same time, they acted altruistically, prioritizing the needs of others over their own or the needs of the sisters they led. If we look at it from the perspective of Levinas (1969), by thinking in an altruistic way, responding to the needs of others without expecting any reward or direct benefit, they minimized their personal happiness (Levinas 1969; Gantt, Burton, 2013). Their motivation was rooted in their relationship with God, and this relationship was subsequently translated into their relationship with the poor and those suffering. The example of the formation of the Daughters of Charity, their spiritual motivation and systematic spiritual life can be an effective prevention of burnout syndrome.

Currently, the motivation for working in charity and non-profit organizations has been weakened more than in the past. One of the reasons may be the limited financial resources of non-profit organizations and the increasing cost of living. They finance their activities mainly through so-called self-financing and fundraising. In terms of financial rewards, they often cannot compete with the for-profit sector. Therefore, it is necessary to support the intrinsic motivation of employees (Ryan, Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is supported by values,

ideals and interests. People are naturally motivated to do activities that are more significant to them and have a higher positive value. Ideals represent positive opinions, goals and efforts in both personal and professional life. Interests activate them in a specific area - they represent the type of motives thanks to which they work on developing their personality (Urban, 2017). Another option for strengthening intrinsic motivation is to practice self-care. Self-care concerns the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual levels of a person's personality. It is important for maintaining intrinsic motivation and for maintaining a balance between personal and professional life. Professional self-care has a special place in professional life. It can often be implemented in the form of supporting the professional development of employees, for example, through consistent supervision, training, internships, conferences, continuing education, setting professional boundaries, collegial relationships on a formal and informal level, contacts with other professionals, team building, holidays, etc. These means of self-care create support for a safe working environment for social workers (Bloomquist et al., 2015). Choosing appropriate self-care strategies from various areas of supporting human development is also important for professional care. Research confirms that employees of non-profit organizations who engage in positive self-care have a better mental well-being and are more motivated to perform their work duties or mission. If they cannot find enough time to take care of themselves, they experience feelings of guilt or anxiety resulting from neglecting their own physical, psychological, emotional and relaxation needs (Panda, 2020).

The aim of the article is to highlight selected aspects of self-care among social workers working in the non-profit sector, in a selected non-profit organization and in a Centre for Children and Families, which is under the umbrella of the state administration. The basis for the implementation of the research in question are the results of studies that have shown that people who have problems taking care of themselves are less likely to be able to properly take care of others. These findings are particularly important for professional work in the field of helping professions (Pavot, Diener, 2008).

The article deals with a brief theoretical basis that forms the area of self-care and the relationship to oneself. This relationship significantly affects the motivation to help others and also the opposite of satisfaction from helping, which can result in various manifestations and syndromes. The presentation of the research carried out follows.

Theoretical background

Self-care means being kind, appreciative and compassionate to oneself, taking one's own needs and feelings seriously (Kernberg, 2006). It focuses on consciously achieving two basic goals. The first goal is to avoid stress, overload and unpleasant emotions, and to work on their positive management. The second goal is to maintain or increase well-being and overall functioning. Both goals can be achieved through effective interventions. One of the important interventions for workers working in helping professions, including social workers in the workplace, is participation in activities that promote physical and mental health. It includes quality sleep, good physical fitness, exercise and healthy eating. Research has shown a link between quality eating and higher levels of mental health, well-being and happiness. The second intervention is the management of negative emotions and strengthening resilience, the ability to overcome adverse conditions, which is related to increased performance at work, as well as strengthening social relationships. Effective stress management, increased self-confidence, as well as subjective well-being, are influenced by the third intervention, which is meditation. This helps to improve mood swings and reduce negative emotions. The fourth intervention, sensory, which helps to reduce stress levels through touch and smell, also contributes to reducing high stress levels (Butler et al., 2019; Leão et al., 2017).

In addition to self-care, the relationship with oneself is important. This relationship, in addition to all areas of life, also determines the motivation to help others. If a person accepts himself, he can also have healthy and fulfilling relationships with others, because he acts in relation to himself and through himself to others. How he perceives himself is reflected in his thinking, behaviour, actions, decision-making and how he sets his own goals. If he is unable to accept himself or value himself, and does not believe in his abilities, he is not satisfied with his own life - and this is inevitably reflected in his work environment. He lacks inner peace, is unable to control his thoughts, feelings and behaviour, has problems in applying his potential, and adapting to newly emerging situations. Many studies, as well as current professional knowledge, confirm that in order for a person to be able to apply his unique potential and develop his growth, he must value himself and accept himself. Self-acceptance, self-esteem, a high sense of self-worth, a sense of purpose in life, and personal progress support psychological health (Ryff, Keyes, 1995).

In the case of low self-care or an insufficiently well-processed relationship with oneself and the related adequate perception of a sense of self-worth or self-esteem, it may happen that the opposite of satisfaction from helping others

develops. Healthy satisfaction from helping others, for example in the field of charity work, reflects the joy of a social or volunteer worker doing their job well and experiencing a good feeling from changing the lives of others for the better. The opposite of helping satisfaction can take the form of burnout syndrome, compassion fatigue, impostor syndrome, or helper syndrome.

Burnout can be characterized as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, which can lead to a decrease in the feeling of personal fulfilment, self-esteem and self-confidence. It mainly concerns those who try to do things to the fullest and put their heart into everything (Rush, 2003). An important prevention is physical, mental and spiritual self-care, which includes active stress management strategies (Salvagioni, 2017).

Compassion fatigue also manifests itself in burnout. Compassion fatigue, like burnout, leads to problems in interactions on a professional and personal level as a result of emotional exhaustion, as well as depression and anxiety. The difference is that compassion fatigue arises suddenly as a response to long-term work with traumatized clients. This work is specific in that they experience emotional pain that is reflected in the physical plane and feelings of discomfort and discomfort. In contrast, burnout develops gradually as a response to stressors in working with clients (Thomas, 2013). One possible prevention of compassion fatigue is to promote self-esteem, autonomy, and self-care, for example by strengthening resilience or self-compassion. Other important factors in prevention are a sense of purpose in the work performed and positive work relationships (Boyle, 2011).

Impostor syndrome also has a significant impact on self-evaluation, self-esteem, and also on work performance and job satisfaction. The reason is that people with this syndrome feel that they are not as competent or capable of performing their work as those around them think. They are unable to internalize their own successes. On the contrary, they perceive them as being due to coincidence, luck, or favourable external circumstances. According to their beliefs, they did not achieve them through their own efforts, abilities, or skills. They exhibit low self-esteem and self-confidence. They experience constant fear of being discovered to be fake and unable to perform their work as they set out to do. Their behaviour cyclically manifests perfectionism or procrastination when taking on a new job. As a result of negative relationship patterns experienced, they compare themselves with others, which ultimately strengthens their self-doubt and perfectionism (Cromwell et al., 1990). Possible prevention of this syndrome is guidance towards self-knowledge, building self-esteem, self-confidence and self-relationship, and also changing negative patterns of thinking and acting.

Helper syndrome or rescuer syndrome (helper syndrome in some cases

also called rescuer syndrome) can also contribute to burnout syndrome. This syndrome is characterized by an increased tendency to help others at the expense of one's own needs. The origin can be found in traumatic experiences in which the helper showed self-sacrifice and self-denial for the benefit of others. With this behaviour, the person who helps tries to correct the emotional neglect that he himself experienced. However, this negative pattern can lead to unhealthy emotional dependence and feelings of guilt that appear if he cannot help others. These processes further reduce his self-esteem (Baker, Vincent, 2023). Possible prevention is similar to the case of the impostor syndrome, the basis of which is building self-esteem, self-relationship, and emotional self-sufficiency.

Research

Aim and Methods

The implementation of this research took place in the period from January to September 2025. The research in question used a qualitative research methodology. This type of research is dominated by fieldwork, which has an exploratory and descriptive character due to the interest in the process, meaning and understanding of the information obtained through the statements of the respondents. It uses an inductive method of investigation, which infers a general conclusion from unique statements. The researcher builds abstracts, concepts, hypotheses and theories based on the statements of the respondents. The benefit of this approach is the possibility of a deeper and more varied study of complex topics that contain a wide range of feelings and experiences (Creswell, 2013).

In this case, the selection of the research sample was carried out using the so-called purposive sampling method, which allows the use of a wide range of methods to locate specific cases and difficult-to-reach types of respondents (Creswell, 2013).

15 respondents aged 35-60 participated in the research. Four respondents work in the non-profit sector, in the NGO Nádej Topoľčany, and eleven respondents work in the state administration, in the Centre for Children and Families in Bratislava. The condition for inclusion in the research was a completed university education in the field of social work and at least five years of experience in this field.

The process of collecting the necessary data began by establishing personal contact with potential research participants, through the director of the selected Centre for Children and Families and members of the committee of the selected

OZ, or via e-mail and other available online applications. After establishing the initial contact, the purpose of the research was presented to the selected sample, and a discussion took place about its ethical issues. Another meeting was held for the purpose of collecting the necessary data itself. Qualitative data were obtained through research interviews, using standardized questions, in order to obtain a detailed picture of the opinions and perceptions of the research participants on a certain topic. One interview lasted 54 min, 18 s.

When planning this research, it was necessary to focus on ethical issues, because research in the field of social work is often an invasion of the privacy of respondents and some personal information is also shared. Participants in this type of research should be protected by a safe environment so that they can share their experiences without fear. Participation in the research necessarily requires the voluntariness of the respondents themselves, and therefore it is necessary to respect their willingness to participate in the research as well as their possible refusal to participate. During the research, the anonymity of the respondents was maintained without the possibility of identification.

The research participants were informed in writing about the possibility of terminating the research at any time. After the respondents provided their written consent to their voluntary participation in the research, they were presented with a statement on the protection of personal data. The research participants confirmed their consent to such with their signatures.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the research participants and recorded by careful transcription. In order to maintain the anonymity of the respondents, the recordings were subsequently deleted in their presence.

The aim of the research was to describe how social workers working in OZ Nádej Topoľčany and the Röntgenova Bratislava Children and Family Centre perceive self-care and what helps them in practising it.

The reliability of the research was ensured through consultation with the research supervisor. In the research conducted, the limiting factor was the number of respondents from both groups of social workers and therefore the results related only to a certain smaller number of respondents. As a result, extensive research with a larger number of respondents is needed. For the analysis, data from the interview transcripts were collated and analysed using an eight-step data analysis process strategy. The analysis highlighted the individual topics that the respondents addressed in the interviews.

Results

Topic 1: Workload and weakened intrinsic motivation

According to the statements of the respondents working in the Centre for Children and Families Röntgenova Bratislava, they often experience a high workload at the workplace. This workload and the resulting stress factors also result in problems with maintaining a balance between the family and work environment, and tense situations with family members.

According to their statements, the respondents working in OZ Nádej Topoľčany do not experience stress from the workload. However, they have a weakened motivation to work. The reason is the low financial evaluation typical of the non-profit sector and insufficient support in organizing and implementing activities. The motivation of the respondents is also reduced by the fact that the employer does not expand the recipients of assistance and always only specific individuals or groups receive the necessary assistance and support.

Topic 2: Attitude toward self-care

Both groups of respondents perceive self-care as important for their work and personal lives and try to practice it. On a physical level, it is manifested by practising sufficient rest and sleep, relaxation, exercise, and a healthy lifestyle, which also includes quality nutrition. On an emotional level, they focus on actively managing their own emotions and building a healthy relationship with themselves. According to respondents, the spiritual level of self-care includes meditation, religious faith, most often Christian, an active prayer life, reading the Bible, and support from the church community and fellow believers.

According to their statements, respondents from both groups are aware that they need to improve their self-care and relationship with themselves. During the research, they were involved in a tele-rehabilitation intervention program, in which the principles of gestalt therapy and person-centred therapy were applied.

Topic 3: Benefits of exercises based on the principles of Gestalt therapy and person-centered therapy

In the exercises in the tele-rehabilitation intervention program with the principles of Gestalt therapy, respondents from both groups were attracted by the

focus on their growth, development and inner sense of motivation. Respondents also liked Gestalt therapy's emphasis on satisfaction and the belief that the inner self cannot exist without the influence of other people and that the content of the mind is formed primarily through the interactions of this self with others. They were also attracted by Gestalt therapy's effort to help them examine their thinking and actions in order to better understand their negative life experiences and responsibility for their own existence. Respondents stated in their statements that in order to improve self-care and their relationship with themselves, they need support in who they really are. Also, help in processing strong or negative emotions, "deepening" interpersonal relationships and strengthening the ability to actively listen and in building space for self-knowledge and engagement. In the work environment, the principles of Gestalt therapy help respondents create a safe environment for clients in which they find support and genuine interest.

The principles of person-centred therapy included in the exercises of the aforementioned intervention program supported respondents from both groups in gaining control over their own negative emotions and strengthening their sense of freedom, along with a sense of responsibility. They also helped them strengthen their ability to self-reflect and their focus on new and positive perspectives in life. They supported their ability to express themselves authentically and be themselves. According to the respondents, these aspects contributed to the alleviation of symptoms of burnout and thus to the improvement of self-care.

Exercises with the principles of Gestalt therapy and the principles of person-centred therapy helped respondents move towards greater self-acceptance and a perception of higher self-worth and self-esteem, achieving deeper self-awareness and greater emotional balance. Respondents were supported in increasing self-care through gradual and small changes in their daily lives. The aim was to help respondents find a way to more easily process stressful, negative and unpredictable situations and at the same time recognize feelings of gratitude and positive emotions. One of the changes mentioned was to encourage respondents to observe what changed about themselves during the intervention program and how they felt during it - what they experienced. Their task was to write down what they were grateful for and what brought them joy in their personal lives, and what encouraged them in their professional lives, in the performance of their work duties.

Discussion

The purpose of involving respondents in the intervention program was to increase their overall well-being and motivation in the work environment. The

positive impact of intervention programs in the area of self-care corresponds to similar research that examines the improvement of self-care in helping professions. Intervention programs help these workers strengthen their positive qualities and reveal important aspects of self-care to them (Yahaya, 2022). In the case of this research, the intervention program was designed to take into account the high workload of social workers working in a selected Centre for Children and Families, and at the same time the weakened motivation of social workers in a selected non-profit organization. It is important for both groups of social workers to work on improving self-care in their daily and working lives through the following aspects.

The first aspect is the application of active strategies for coping with stressful or unpredictable situations and the loss of motivation. In this aspect of self-care, it is important to become aware of the causes of stress, suppressed emotions, anger and frustration. The next step in this aspect is to release these emotions, frustrations and anger through distraction, engaging in physical activity or changing the environment. The second aspect of self-care is to eliminate the causes of stress, find solutions to the problem that causes the stressful situation and to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of this problem, as well as the solutions discovered. The third aspect of self-care is to create space to overcome fears from a difficult stressful situation, build self-confidence and to continue the self-improvement process. The fourth aspect of self-care is reducing negative thoughts and feelings that increase the emergence of stressful situations and anxiety and which are exhausting on both a mental and physical level. The fifth aspect of self-care is consciously refraining from acting under the influence of stress, which helps to take control and responsibility for one's emotions and life. This aspect includes developing strategies for maintaining calm and rational thinking before reacting to a specific situation or problem and finding a way to oneself. The sixth aspect of self-care focuses on working with one's own priorities to better achieve goals in professional and personal life. The seventh aspect of self-care works with setting physical activities and quality nutrition in such a way that they bring good feelings and a lot of energy. The eighth aspect of self-care includes strategies and activities aimed at supporting one's own positive qualities and empathy for the development of areas of professional and personal life that still require work on oneself and improvement. The ninth aspect is religious coping strategies: these strategies consist of religious faith, prayers and the possibility of sharing with fellow believers. Religious strategies for respondents with religious beliefs express that God is a significant source of help and strength in their personal and professional lives.

Conclusion

It is important to be aware of the risk factors for burnout, compassion fatigue, impostor syndrome and helper syndrome, and to recognize their warning signs. This applies to social workers working in Child and Family Centres as well as to social workers working in the non-profit sector. Self-care plays an important role in this. It helps to perceive various negative situations from new perspectives and supports readiness for change and professional and personal growth. Further research should focus on expanding aspects related to self-care and the possibilities of preventing burnout, compassion fatigue, impostor syndrome and helper syndrome according to the individual personality characteristics of social workers. The knowledge and skills of gestalt therapy and person-centred therapy in this further research could be beneficial for their self-development, self-acceptance and self-awareness. In the area of intervention programs, it is necessary to adjust educational programs designed for social workers in cooperation with experts working in the field of the aforementioned therapies accordingly. These programs should include self-care competencies in the daily practice of social workers' professional and personal lives.

Bibliography

- [1] Baker, J., Vincent, R. Why are some people susceptible to Super-Helper Syndrome and what can be done about it? In *British Journal of Community Nursing*, 28(10), 2023.
- [2] Bloomquist, K. R. et al. Self-care and Professional Quality of Life: Predictive Factors Among MSW Practitioners. In *Advances in Social Work*, 16(2), pp. 292-311, 2015.
- [3] Boyle, D.A. Countering compassion fatigue: A requisite nursing agenda. In *The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 16(1), 2011.
- [4] Butler, L. D. Six domains of self-care: Attending to the whole person. In *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 29(1), pp. 107-124, 2019.
- [5] Creswell, J. W. *Qualitative inquiry & research design. Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications, 2013.
- [6] Cromwell, B. et al. The Impostor Phenomenon and personality characteristics of high school honor students. In *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality*, 5(6), pp. 563-573, 1990.

- [7] Gantt, E., Burton, J. Egoism, altruism, and the ethical foundations of personhood. In *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 53(4), pp. 438–460. 2013.
- [8] Kernberg, O. *WIR: Psychotherapeuten über sich und ihren "unmöglichen" Beruf*. Stuttgart: Schattauer, 2006.
- [9] Leão, E. R. et al., "Stress, self-esteem, and well-being among female health professionals: A randomized clinical trial on the impact of a self-care intervention mediated by the senses," *PloS One*, 12(2), 2017.
- [10] Levinas, E. *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1969.
- [11] Panda, M. et al. Oath to self-care and well-being. In *The American Journal of Medicine*, 133(2), 2020.
- [12] Pavot, W., Diener, E. The Satisfaction With Life Scale and the emerging construct of life satisfaction. In *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 137–152, 2008.
- [13] Rush, M. D. *Syndrom vyhoření*. Praha: Návrat domů, 2003.
- [14] Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions. In *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), pp. 54–67, 2000.
- [15] Ryff, C. D., Keyes, C. L. M. The structure of psychological well-being revisited. In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), pp. 719–727, 1995.
- [16] Salvagioni, D. A. J. Physical, psychological and occupational consequences of job burnout: A systematic review of prospective studies. In *PLoS ONE*, 12(10), 2017.
- [17] Thomas, J. Association of personal distress with burnout, compassion fatigue, and compassion satisfaction among clinical social workers. In *Journal of Social Service Research* 39(3), pp. 365–379, 2013.
- [18] Urban, J. *Motivace a odměňování pracovníků. Co musíte vědět, abyste ze svých spolupracovníků dostali to nejlepší*. Praha: Grada Publishing, 2017.
- [19] Yahaya, N. A. et al. Effects of Self-Care Education Intervention Program (SCEIP) on Activation Level, Psychological Distress, and Treatment-Related Information. In *Healthcare*, 10(8), 2022.