

# Supporting and developing resilience in social work



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# Introduction

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Resilience is not an innate characteristic or personality trait that you either have or you don't. It arises from successful adaptation to everyday events rather than unusual ones, and emerges from ordinary human capabilities, relationships and other internal and external resources. Ann Masten, a research expert in this area calls it 'ordinary magic'. It is a quality and a process that can be enhanced and developed which is good news for social workers, who are typically required to manage change and complex, competing demands (Grant and Kinman, 2015, p. 5).

In this free course, *Supporting and developing resilience in social work*, you investigate how you, as a social work practitioner, can be supported to enhance your emotional resilience.

In the first section you explore the idea of resilience and begin to develop your own 'emotional resilience toolkit' of skills and strategies. After this, you then consider the concept of leadership and its skills and qualities. You revisit the importance of supervision in relation to developing and maintaining resilience. Finally, you review what you have added to your toolkit.

## Key questions

- Why do you need to be emotionally resilient, and what skills and strategies are involved?
- What skills and qualities are involved in professional leadership?
- What can you expect from your managers, and how can you get the best out of your supervision?

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [K315 Social work practice](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- discuss why emotional resilience is important in social work practice and what skills and strategies are involved
- explore the support that social workers can expect from their managers, and how to get the best out of supervision
- demonstrate a critical understanding of the skills and qualities involved in social work professional leadership
- understand the benefits of criticality, reflection and analysis to social work practice and continuing professional development.

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# 1 What is emotional resilience?

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Social work is a rewarding job, but it is emotionally challenging and can be stressful. You know this from experience, but may not be familiar with survey and research evidence about this. For example, researchers Grant and Kinman (2014, p. 6) write that: 'For several years, the UK Labour Force Survey (HSE, 2013) has found the highest prevalence rates of work-related stress amongst health and social care workers.'

This may not seem a very encouraging start to this OpenLearn course but it is worth knowing that, despite evidence of high stress, studies have also found consistently high job satisfaction among social workers (Stalker et al., 2007; Collins, 2008).

If social work is such a stressful occupation, what helps social workers to survive, and even thrive? This is a question which researchers have been keen to explore. According to Beddoe et al. (2013, p. 102), research indicates that resiliency is supported by:

- factors that reside within individuals
- factors that reside in the organisational context
- factors linked with the educational preparation of practitioners.

The concept of emotional resilience may be familiar to you in relation to children and adult service users (Gilligan, 2009; Smith and Hollinger-Smith, 2015). Simply defined, it refers to people's capacity to constructively protect themselves – and rebound – from stress. In the workplace, stress is 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work' (Weinberg and Murphy, 2013). It is important to note that resilience is usually conceptualised as a two-dimensional construct 'including the experience of adverse conditions and the presence of positive skills in coping with these conditions' (Beddoe et al., 2013, p. 101). In this sense, it is the experience of overcoming adversity which develops a person's resilience. As you will see, adversity can arise from both personal and external stress factors.

## 1.1 Social worker resilience

To help you think about resilience for yourself as a social worker, in Activity 1 you will see three videos featuring Cassie, a children and family social worker. In the first video you will see a snapshot from a typical day in a busy children's social work team and a referral that comes in concerning an allegation of sexual abuse by a grandfather. This is the sort of very emotionally upsetting and challenging task that social workers may have to engage in. In the videos that follow, you will hear from Cassie about her approach to social work practice and how she handles some of the stresses she faces. As a student you might not have experienced this kind of referral directly but it is highly likely that you will have faced other kinds of challenges, uncertainties and dilemmas. This activity will help you explore how Cassie and the team deal with these aspects of social work practice and to begin to identify ways of developing resilience in your future career.

### Activity 1 Developing resilience

Allow about 1 hour

Watch the following videos and note your comments in the table below.

#### Video 1: A referral

This video shows you a referral coming into a child protection team and it will help you think about the resilience needed for social work.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 1 A referral](#)



#### Video 2: Carrying out home visits

In this clip you will hear from Cassie about how she approaches going out to see a family.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 2 Carrying out home visits](#)



### Video 3: Managing workload

Cassie talks about some of the ways in which she copes with pressure and how she maintains her own emotional resilience.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 3 Managing workload](#)



Note your comments here.

**Table 1 Your answers to Activity 1**

How did you think you would feel dealing with a referral like this?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
What might be some of the tensions and stresses for the worker who will go out to see this family?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
What support might they need?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
What emotions does Cassie express (verbally or non-verbally) when talking about her work?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
What are some of the uncertainties she faces going to see a new family?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
What supports Cassie? Is this enough or would you like to see anything more?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

**Comment**

You probably came up with a substantial list of actual or potential things that might make any social worker, however experienced, feel anxious or upset. In the film, Cassie talks about the ways in which she copes with this pressure and tries to support her own emotional resilience, including seeking support from her manager practically; you might have also thought about emotional support. Cassie also discusses the importance of looking after her own well being and setting appropriate boundaries to support that. Do you agree?

## 1.2 Coping with feelings of distress

In considering Cassie and the team's work in Activity 1 you will have identified features of the situation which are likely to make them feel anxious, distressed or possibly even scared. You might have identified supervision as a place where Cassie or her colleagues could seek support and take their feelings. Martin Smith (2005) argues that a common, although frequently unacknowledged, feature of social work practice is dealing with one's own feelings of fear or distress. These emotions can arise in everyday contexts: sometimes they emerge unexpectedly and can appear irrational. Sometimes they may be influenced by our past experiences. It can be difficult to explain to others why we are distressed; or we may feel too embarrassed and vulnerable to share our emotional reactions. In these circumstances, writing about the incident and our feelings can be helpful. Activity 2 invites you to try this out.

### Activity 2 Reflecting on distressing situations at work: what helps?

Allow about 45 minutes

Think of a time when you felt distressed (anxious, scared or upset) at work or in a personal context. Use the text box provided to write a reflective account of this. Write down what happened to make you distressed; describe your emotions at the time;

recall what helped and what made things worse; and explain how you eventually resolved your distress. At the time, what did you need from your manager/organisation? Was this need met?

Your reflective account is for your own private use, unless you choose to share it with your practice educator/assessor or someone else that you trust. Find out what support is available within your organisation for social workers who have experienced a distressing or frightening incident.

*Provide your answer...*

### Comment

In day-to-day practice, it is common for staff to have fears and anxieties about many things, including worries about their personal competence or their ability to cope. Unpredictable, emotionally-charged events may also cause distress and fear. Smith (2005) found that distress can also arise from organisational issues, to do with bullying, complaints or fear of negative media publicity. Writing about these experiences can be a helpful coping strategy. Individual reflection (or, if it feels safe, with another person) can help you gain insight into the strengths that you drew on in resolving the issue.

Let's consider the example of Cathy, a social work student on placement in a hospice. Despite initial trepidation she found her new colleagues welcoming and supportive. Just as Cathy was beginning to feel more relaxed in the team, she arrived one morning to hear that a patient who had regularly been coming in for respite care had died suddenly. During the course of the day, Cathy found herself feeling more and more upset and eventually had to leave a meeting in tears. One of the social workers took her out for coffee. As Cathy talked about how embarrassed she felt and how she couldn't understand why she had reacted in this way, she realised that something about the patient's death had unexpectedly aroused strong feelings about a loss in her own family. Having gained this insight, Cathy was able to talk more openly in supervision about the emotional impact of working in a setting where terminal illness was commonplace.

In Cathy's case the supportive and open culture of the team made it easier for colleagues to respond to her distress, and safe for emotion to be on the agenda in supervision. How does this supportive environment compare with the incident you wrote about?

Smith's (2005) research revealed that social workers' experiences of distress and fear have disabling consequences. One of his observations was that if difficult feelings are acknowledged, and if practitioners are supported to process them, this can lead to personal and professional growth. On the other hand, he acknowledged that some people choose to cope with their experiences of fear by not thinking or talking about them: in this case, their choice should be respected.

Activity 1 highlights that managers have a responsibility and a duty of care towards their staff, and it is important that organisational cultures are created where anxieties and fears – real or imagined, minor or significant – are recognised, validated and responded to appropriately.

## 1.3 Emotional labour

Social work inevitably involves a considerable amount of 'emotional labour': 'the management of feelings performed as part of paid work' (Gorman, in Adams et al., 2009, p. 95). For example, social workers may need to conceal their immediate emotional response to maintain a non-judgemental or authoritative stance (Kinman et al., 2011); doing this can become stressful over time.

Although social workers routinely work with people experiencing distress and with service users who would prefer not to see them, this does not (and should not) mean that they become immune to ordinary human responses. You have probably developed ways of responding to expressions of anger or hostility, but this should not be at the expense of suppressing your own emotion. Lack of congruence between personal feelings and professional values can lead to 'self-alienation, emotional depletion and burnout' (Grant and Kinman, 2014, p. 41). On the other hand, Megele (2015, p. 7) suggests that the explicit recognition of emotional labour 'offers us the opportunity to better manage the emotional toil and demand of everyday practice.' This is an example of the 'ordinary magic', in which a problem shared can build resilience.

## 1.4 Organisational and socio-political factors

Concerns about workforce retention have prompted a considerable body of research exploring the organisational and socio-political factors of social worker stress. Reviewing this literature, Beddoe et al. (2013) note the following areas of concern:

- There are issues concerning the wellbeing of newly graduated social workers, where the focus is on knowledge and tasks rather than developing professionally as a person.
- Discussions note the potential for adverse experiences in social work in child protection, and to some extent in health settings.
- Being exposed to very challenging circumstances experienced by some service users – such as abuse, neglect, acute grief, severe illness and trauma – can contribute to 'compassion fatigue' and emotional exhaustion for social workers.
- Workplace adversities also stem from high caseloads, changes in funding and organisational arrangements, and limited resources.

These concerns are well-supported by research. For example, Neil's (2014) study of 12 child protection social workers in Scotland

[How does child protection work affect social workers?](#) illustrates very powerfully the research findings of Beddoe et al.

Experiences of adversity can also arise as a result of racism, homophobia and other kinds of discrimination in the workplace and in wider society (CommunityCare, 2012; McNicoll, 2013a). In fact, this is one reason that Garrett (2015) takes a critical stance to the concept of resilience itself, drawing attention to the way in which seeing resilience as an individual responsibility tends to minimise the impact of the societal and political context.

While individual resilience develops from overcoming difficult circumstances, including both personal and external sources of stress, it cannot, of course, resolve wider organisational and structural sources of stress. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and trade unions run campaigns to address workplace stress and other social

issues. Employers have a 'duty of care' to their staff. In England the Local Government Association (LGA) has published standards for employers to reduce social worker stress, although [Webber \(2015\)](#) suggests they are not widely adopted. In Scotland and Wales, there are care council codes of practice for social service employers. You may wish to consult the relevant documents to find out what you can expect from your agency in relation to staff support.

## 2 Enhancing resilience

As previously discussed, overcoming challenges appears to strengthen emotional resilience. For example, studies of black and minority ethnic social work students report that succeeding in the face of disadvantage – including discrimination and socio-economic inequalities – could be a source of optimism and resilience. Students spoke of ‘having something to strive towards [...] the belief that anything is possible so you push yourself’ (Fairtlough et al., 2014, p. 613); and expressed strong determination ‘I just got to believe in myself and said well, I’m going to go for it, I’ll do it’ (Hillen, 2013, p. 19).

Researchers have become interested in the resilience shown by social workers in the face of workplace demands and other stressors (for example, Beddoe et al., 2013; Collins, 2007; 2008; Collins et al., 2010). Louise Grant and Gail Kinman, social work educators and researchers at the University of Bedford, conducted a study to explore the development of resilience as a protective factor to enhance the confidence and wellbeing of social work students.

Grant and Kinman (2014) suggest that the most resilient social workers are those who have developed a varied repertoire of coping strategies, which can be drawn on in different kinds of difficult situations. They came up with the idea of an ‘emotional resilience toolkit’ which we have adopted in this course.

### 2.1 Creating your emotional resilience toolkit

This is a good point at which to set up your ‘toolkit’ of practical techniques to develop and support your emotional resilience. The simplest way is to create a folder on your own computer or tablet and name it ‘emotional resilience toolkit’. As you continue through this course save notes and other documents into your toolkit. You could also create a Word document within the folder, in which you can build up a list of ‘bookmarks’ by copying and pasting links to websites or documents that you find helpful. Alternatively, you are free to create your toolkit in any format that enables you to access the resources wherever you are. For example, you may wish to save bookmarks on one device and then sync with your mobile phone.

However you set up your toolkit, remember that it is intended as a practical resource which you can use in your social work practice. For this to become a genuine resource it is important to be proactive in deciding what to keep and to add other ideas generated by your reading or practice. In Activity 3 you explore the meaning of emotional resilience and its implications for your practice. The activity includes a reading which is based on research with social work students, but its findings are equally applicable to qualified and experienced social workers.

#### Activity 3 Building emotional resilience

Allow about 1 hour

In this activity you will read

[Enhancing wellbeing in social work students: building resilience in the next generation](#)

by Grant and Kinman (2012).

## Part A

Read the first half (pp. 605–12) in which the authors summarise their research and outline the key competencies and factors which produce resilience.

As you read, you may find it helpful to look at your notes for Activity 1. Or, if you felt that you needed more support than you were offered, think about what was missing as you read the Grant and Kinman article.

## Part B

Now read the second half of the Grant and Kinman (2012) article (p. 612 onwards) which suggests practical strategies that have the potential to promote resilience and wellbeing. As you read this, notice which strategies sound helpful for you.

In the text box provided, make some notes about three techniques that you intend to practise in future. Be realistic about these, and select what is personally meaningful and achievable. You may wish to include a technique that you use already, but try to add at least one new one. Save these into your toolkit.

*Provide your answer...*

## Comment

It is likely that by this stage in your career you are already using many skills to support your emotional resilience, even if you haven't previously thought about this. As new challenges arise during your continuing progression, you will find it useful to carry on developing your toolkit.

The techniques that you have selected may reflect and build on coping strategies that you already use. For example, you may already be familiar with the concept of peer coaching, but gained new ideas from the techniques described. On the other hand, you may have picked out strategies that offer a new way of dealing with difficulties. You may not have considered 'mindfulness' before now, but liked some of the suggestions for focusing on the present rather than excessively dwelling on past mistakes or worrying about what might happen in the future.

If you identified an interest in time management, you may also have thought about this in relation to work-life balance. As an experienced practitioner it is likely that you are already proficient at managing the boundaries between work and home life. You will know that it can be difficult to leave the job behind at the end of the day, and social workers can struggle to maintain a healthy separation between work and home. Commitment to the job is essential for satisfaction, but over-involvement can be detrimental for non-work life, and can even lead to difficulties in maintaining professional boundaries with service users. Over time, this is likely to have a negative effect on your sense of job satisfaction as well as your personal life and wellbeing.

You may also have reflected that resilience can vary across a social worker's professional career. Even though you are likely to become more resilient over time, changes in both organisational and personal circumstances may reduce your resilience. However experienced you are, it will always be important to seek support at such times.

## Audios: Developing resilience

Audios 1-3 provide some suggestions from Janet Howard, Sophie Terrill and June Sadd about how newly qualified social workers might develop their own emotional resilience.

### Audio 1: Janet Howard

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 1: Janet Howard](#)

### Audio 2: Sophie Terrill

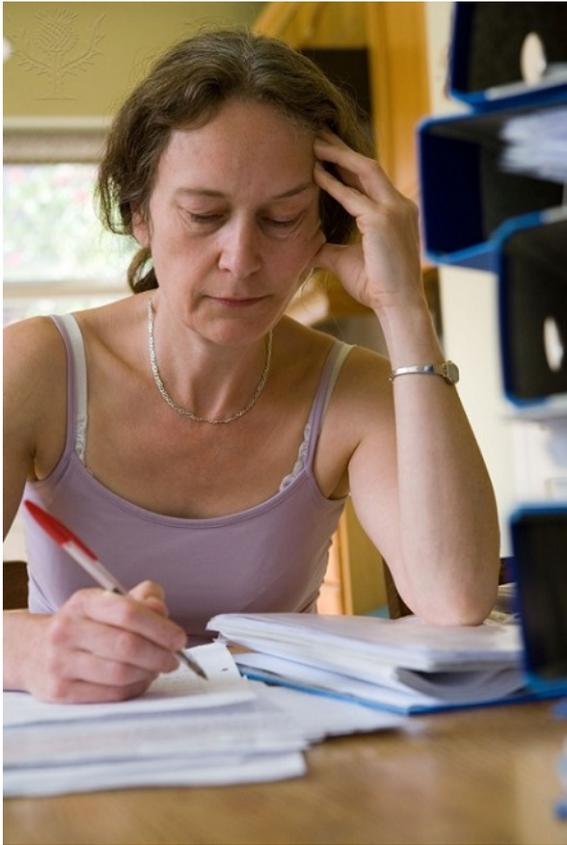
Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 2: Sophie Terrill](#)

### Audio 3: June Sadd

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 3: June Sadd](#)



**Figure 1** Woman sitting at desk with pen and paperwork

### Going further

You may wish to search online and discover more about one or two of the strategies identified by Grant and Kinman (2012; 2015). For example, journals such as *Community Care* often publish tips about time management and personal organisation techniques; mindfulness; taking care of your health; or peer support and coaching.

## 2.2 Skills and techniques

There is no right or wrong way to enhance resilience: one size does not fit all, and different techniques work for different people. Remember the idea of resilience as ‘ordinary magic’ which grows each time you successfully deal with everyday demands. Before moving on, check your understanding of resilience against the summary of resilience skills and techniques in Box 1. You may also wish to use this summary to rate your current development, and add your evaluation to your toolkit.

### Box 1 Skills and techniques which boost resilience

According to Grant and Kinman (2012, 2014) the following competencies are particularly important in enhancing resilience:

## Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to motivate oneself and be persistent when faced with frustration; to regulate one's moods and maintain the ability to think even when distressed; to display empathy and hope. Emotionally intelligent people are said to be flexible, self-confident and co-operative, use coping strategies, and have good problem solving and decision-making abilities.

## Reflective ability

Research indicates that the ability to reflect on one's feelings and beliefs, and the position of others, is associated with having greater resilience to stress. During supervision, expressing and questioning doubts, values and assumptions helps social workers make sense of complex situations. As well as enhancing practice, reflection is thus a valuable self-protective mechanism.

## Empathy

It appears that a social worker's resilience to stress is enhanced by their ability to acknowledge service users' perspectives, and to show empathetic feelings of warmth, compassion and concern towards others. Research suggests that empathy produces a sense of personal accomplishment and psychological wellbeing in the practitioner. Clear emotional boundaries are also required, however, in order to prevent over-empathising and over-involvement, which is likely to have negative implications for service users and lead to distress and burnout for social workers.

## Social competencies and social support

Research findings suggest that social support is one of the most important buffers against stress. It is therefore important for you to identify potential sources of support from your professional and personal networks. The same social skills required for building and maintaining working relationships with service users, carers and other professionals – effective communication, self-confidence and the ability to be assertive – are equally important for developing successful social support networks amongst colleagues, family and friends.

## Resilience techniques:

Grant and Kinman (2012, 2014) discuss the following resilience techniques:

- enhancing skills in emotional intelligence, reflective practice, social awareness and empathetic skills
- stress management techniques such as relaxation and time management skills
- reflective thinking skills
- writing a reflective diary
- using supervision for reflective practice
- social skills

- peer coaching for support
- optimistic explanatory styles
- coping skills and flexibility
- mindfulness and relaxation
- cognitive behavioural techniques (CBT).

In this section you have enhanced your awareness of the internal and external factors which produce stress. You have also considered the importance of emotional resilience for your own practice, and identified some skills and strategies that could be developed. Towards the end of this course you will be asked to develop an action plan for further learning. By this stage of your learning, you will already be aware that reflection and supervision are important for skill development; they also have the potential to reduce the stressful side effects of emotional labour, and support social workers to manage emotions and build resilience.

So far, this course has encouraged you to explore strategies that you can use to develop your emotional resilience at work. The responsibility for protecting social workers' wellbeing, however, does not rest only with individual practitioners, or even with professional bodies. In the next section you consider the essential role of social work employers and managers in supporting their staff and fostering emotional resilience. You also consider the qualities and skills involved in professional leadership. You are probably developing these skills already: leaders can create or prompt change within social work practice, but they do not have to be in management positions.

## 3 Engaging with professional leadership

The influential Laming Report (Laming, 2003, p. 10) emphasised the need for 'robust' and 'strong' leadership. The way in which social work is managed and led has a significant impact on outcomes for service users and on the wellbeing and effectiveness of practitioners.

What does the word 'leadership' mean to you? Perhaps at this stage of your social work career you find it difficult to engage with this concept. A helpful idea is that leadership is not confined to managers, but is also concerned with influencing practice and supporting the development of other people. As a social work student you are expected to develop initial leadership ability. This could be through taking your ideas to supervision; contributing to team building and learning or initiating a constructive dialogue about your concerns. Critical practitioners will continually examine and develop their leadership skills in their work, even when they are not specifically designated as leaders or managers in their organisation.

### 3.1 Managers and leaders: what's the difference?

There is a considerable body of theory and writing about 'leadership', 'management', and the connections and differences between them. You explore some of these ideas in Activity 4. Developing an ongoing critical awareness of the leadership characteristics of the managers and leaders with whom you work will help your own development.

#### Activity 4 Management and leadership

Allow about 1 hour 30 minutes

For this activity you need to undertake three readings. The first two are short extracts which provide a way in to the topics of management and leadership, introducing some key concepts. The third reading is longer and explores theoretical ideas in greater depth.

Read from *Practising Social Work in a Complex World* :

- [Management and managerialism](#) (Payne, 2009), pp. 143–5 and pp. 153–6
- [Strategic planning and leadership](#) (Payne, 2009), pp.183–4.

Then, to gain a deeper understanding of management and leadership theories, read the following book chapter: [Leading, managing, caring](#)

This is by Simons and Lomax and appears in Mackian, S. and Simons J. (eds) *Leading, Managing, Caring: Understanding Leadership and Management in Health and Social Care* , Routledge/Open University.

When you have finished reading, in Table 2 illustrate and evaluate the characteristics of any two or more leadership approaches that you have read about, using examples from your own experience. People have different preferences about leadership styles that work well for them. Note the advantages and disadvantages of each model from your own perspective.

**Table 2 Your answers to Activity 4**

Leadership models	Example from own experience	Pros and cons from your perspective
Transformational	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Transactional	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Situational	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Distributed	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Now think about the following questions in relation to your place of employment. In what ways do organisational structure and culture impact on the experience of being a social worker or a service user in a practice agency?

- In terms of your own self-management (personal management) what obligations and responsibilities do you and your manager have? What support do you gain from being part of the organisation?
- How do power relations within the agency impact on yourself or your colleagues? What are the implications for the service?
- In the light of these ideas, what can you expect from your manager?

*Provide your answer...*

#### Comment

This activity should have introduced you to some key ideas in management theory, and prompted you to think about your own relationship to leadership. You may have been a manager yourself or have worked with some inspiring and very competent managers.

An organisation's hierarchical structure and its culture (often implicit) are closely linked with its leadership model. All of these will impact on the experience of being a social worker or a service user in your practice agency. Workplace culture can set the scene for responses to practitioners' emotions and concerns.

In practice, there are overlaps between the theoretical approaches and large organisations do not usually operate according to a single management model; it is likely that you identified a mixed approach on your examples. The transactional model is said to be the most commonly found leadership approach (Pine and Healy, 2007). On the other hand, you may have experienced leaders who take a 'transformational' approach, seeking to engage people's cooperation and commitment. You may have noticed 'situational' leaders who can adjust their leadership style to suit different contexts. Perhaps you work in an organisation which takes quite a different view of leadership; in a small team, leadership may be more flexible and organic; or there may be a participatory and collective approach to decision-making. There are similarities between a transformational leadership style and a feminist one (Pine and

Healy, 2007); and you may work with particular managers and leaders who adopt a feminist approach in terms of promoting collaboration and sharing power.  
What can you expect from your manager?

## 3.2 Influencing the practice of others

In Activity 5 you explore the idea that leadership can also be demonstrated by people who are not managers, in the sense of influencing the practice of others.

### Activity 5 Leadership qualities and skills for social workers

Allow about 15 minutes

#### Part A

Write two suggestions about how you can contribute to leadership in your workplace.

*Provide your answer...*

#### Comment

The material you have read so far may have prompted you to identify personal and professional qualities arising from everyday social work practice which – directly or indirectly – help to develop leadership.

#### Part B

Audios 4–6 give you a chance to hear June, Sophie and Roseann's views on how the concepts of leadership and management can help social workers in everyday practice.

#### Audio 4: June Sadd

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 4: June Sadd](#)

#### Audio 5: Sophie Terrill

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 5: Sophie Terrill](#)

#### Audio 6: Roseann Connolly

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 6: Roseann Connolly

### Going further: management, leadership and change

You can find further materials about leadership in the following OpenLearn free course:

[\*Groups and teamwork\*](#) .

## 4 Supervision

Supervision provides a safe environment for critical reflection, challenge and professional support that operates alongside an organisation's appraisal process. It includes time for reflection on practice issues that arise in the course of everyday work, and can help social workers and their managers to do their jobs more effectively. It enables social workers to develop their capacity to use their experiences to review practice, receive feedback on their performance, build emotional resilience and think reflectively about the relationships they have formed with children, adults and families.

### 4.1 Reflective supervision

All social workers need the opportunity to reflect on their work in supervision. This is not only needed in times of distress and trauma, but on a regular basis as part of ongoing support and learning. The importance of reflective supervision was highlighted by the Social Work Reform Board in 2010. Subsequently the LGA has published a [supervision framework for employers of social workers](#) which you might find useful.

By this stage of your social work development, you are almost certainly experienced in using supervision, although you may need to be proactive in ensuring that you get regular professional supervision. Building on this, in Activity 6 you now think about how you currently use supervision as a means of developing emotional resilience. You will also be creating your own checklist of key points that will help you prepare for and be more active in your supervision sessions.

#### Activity 6 How to make the best use of supervision for emotional resilience

Allow about 1 hour 15 minutes

Read [Achieving effective supervision](#) (Kettle, 2015).

Kettle reviews the key functions of supervision and explores research findings, different models and approaches. He also explores some dynamics of the supervision process which you may find interesting. Thinking about your own experience of supervision to date, focus on points that strike you as important with regard to developing emotional resilience.

Now use the text box provided to create a checklist of actions that will help you prepare for, and be more active in, your current and future supervision sessions. You may wish to share this with your supervisor. In addition, add your checklist to your emotional resilience toolkit.

*Provide your answer...*

#### Comment

Your checklist should be personalised to your own needs, but perhaps you came up with something similar to the following:

## Questions to ask in preparation for supervision

- What has gone really well this week that I am pleased about? Where and how have I excelled?
- What does this tell me about my strengths?
- What is the impact of my practice on service users?
- What have I found difficult in my practice? Where do these difficulties tend to recur? What areas do I feel stuck in?
- What am I learning about myself?
- What are my feelings and emotional reactions to cases that I am currently working with? Am I anxious, fearful, or over-confident, or am I proud and satisfied?
- If I only had to tell my supervisor three things about my practice, what would they be?

(Source: Grant and Brewer, 2014, p. 60)

Your preparation checklist might have been influenced by what is currently happening in your practice, and aspects of your personal life that might impact on practice. You may also have included points to help you address difficult areas in the supervisory relationship or process. It is seen as good practice to draw up a supervision agreement, setting out mutual expectations. Such agreements often include the commitment to be open about power relations between the practitioner and their supervisor, and set out some principles for how difficulties would be addressed.

Phillipson suggests putting 'emancipatory practice' on the supervision agenda, to debate issues of social inequality for service users, and to consider how to address and record service users' unmet needs. Is this something you want to add to your checklist?

Supervision provides support with immediate situations, helping social workers to find solutions to problems that initially seem insurmountable. Good supervision is also a developmental process that enables the supervisee to gain insight their own emotional reactions, doubts, assumptions and beliefs: this, in turn, improves their future practice. Reflective supervision can also provide the opportunity to explore wider issues of social justice.

Critical reflection and reflective supervision (sometimes known as professional or clinical supervision) act as important protective mechanisms for social workers, enabling them to develop the competencies needed for resilience. Reflective ability is essential for developing emotional literacy: the ability to reflect on thoughts, feelings and beliefs and consider those of others. Supervision has important case management and accountability functions, but these should not overshadow the need for reflective supervision.

## 4.2 Barriers to supervision

Phillipson (2009 in Adams et al., 2009) identifies some of the barriers to reflective supervision: it can be side-lined due to high workloads, or unacknowledged power relations or conflicting perspectives may prevent the creation of a safe environment in which emotional reactions can be explored and contained. Supervisees may not be receptive to feedback, or feel unable or unwilling to disclose emotional feelings for fear of criticism.

To help workers and employers be clear about the supervision responsibilities of the agency, the worker and the supervisor, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) has produced a supervision policy. BASW's policy (2011) reinforces social workers' professional right to supervision, and sets out key principles that all social workers should:

- Receive regular, planned, one-to-one, professional supervision from registered and appropriately experienced social workers.
- Have routine opportunities for peer learning and discussion in the workplace and through professional networks.
- Develop and maintain the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding to do their job through continuing professional development.

A key message emphasised in most supervision guidance is that the practitioner has the right to request satisfactory supervision arrangements; equally, professionals must be proactive and take responsibility within the supervisory relationship. If your access to professional supervision (rather than case management supervision) is limited, you may need to seek out additional or alternative sources of support such as peer or group supervision with others in your team, or other forms of shared learning and reflection. Co-working cases can also provide fruitful opportunities for reflection on differing perspectives and knowledge.

## 4.3 Going further

You may wish to search online for examples and guidance about different models of professional supervision, including peer supervision. Try, for example, the Community Care, SCIE and IRIS websites, or search 'supervision in social work' on YouTube. Kettle's (2015) paper (Activity 6) also contains some further reading in the references section.

There are many other sources of advice about ensuring successful social work supervision. Your employer or practice educator/assessor may produce guidance or offer suggestions for books and websites. You may also wish to search online for BASW's supervision policy.

In this section you have extended your learning about supervision to consider its benefits for developing emotional resilience, and you have developed some practical ideas for improving your own supervision practice. Grant and Brewer (2014, p. 64) assert that:

Organisations have a moral imperative as well as a duty of care to manage the wellbeing of their employees effectively... There is an expectation that employers provide good supportive supervision, and social workers who do not receive the support required for safe effective professional practice need to make their employers aware of this shortfall.

Unfortunately the reality of a high-pressure social work office does not always match up to the principles outlined by BASW, and the *Community Care* journal frequently reports instances where social workers are left unsupported despite high workloads (Schraer, 2016). In some circumstances, you may need to seek reflective (professional) supervision from someone other than your manager or supervisor. Some organisations encourage peer supervision, and some multi-agency teams enable their staff to access external supervision from someone in their own profession.

## 5 Reviewing emotional resilience

Before ending your work on this course, take some time to review your Emotional Resilience Toolkit. This is intended to be a practical and realistic set of ideas that you can take into your first qualified social work role.

### Activity 7 Take stock of your emotional resilience toolkit and create an action plan

Allow about 1 hour

- Spend half an hour reviewing the various documents and ideas that you have collected together in your toolkit folder. If you have forgotten to file anything, now is the time to do it. Re-read what you have written, and see if it still seems practical and realistic.
- Having reviewed your toolkit, draw up an action plan for emotional resilience. Maybe you have identified skills or strategies that will need further development, so this is a way to start planning how to access guidance or training.

#### Comment

You may wish to discuss your toolkit and action plan with your line manager, supervisor or a colleague. Developing and maintaining emotional resilience doesn't end with becoming qualified, and will continue to be an area of professional development throughout your career.

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## Conclusion

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This free course, *Supporting and developing resilience in social work*, has given you an opportunity to review and develop your emotional resilience skills, through examining processes, structures and strategies which support this.

You have been encouraged to take a critical approach to understanding professionalism, and considered the benefits of a strong and positive professional identity to support personal and collective resilience. You also considered the importance of supervision, in enhancing your capacity to work with the emotional challenges of social work.

This free course includes adapted extracts from the course *Critical Social Work Practice*. If you are interested in this subject and want to study formally with us, you may wish to explore other courses we offer in [Social work](#).

- Social work is an emotionally challenging job and social workers need to develop a repertoire of skills and strategies to enable them to be resilient and provide the best possible service.
- Regular, reflective supervision supports emotional resilience and professional development: social workers have the right to request it, and they also need to share responsibility through good preparation and being open to discussion and feedback.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [K315 Social work practice](#).

You may also be interested in the free OpenLearn course [Developing career resilience](#). You can earn a free digital badge on completion of this course.

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### **Text**

Activity 3: Grant, L. and Kinman, G. (2012) 'Enhancing wellbeing in social work students: building resilience in the next generation', *Social Work Education*, vol. 31, no. 5, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

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