

# Helping social workers manage emotional distress

## Messages from research

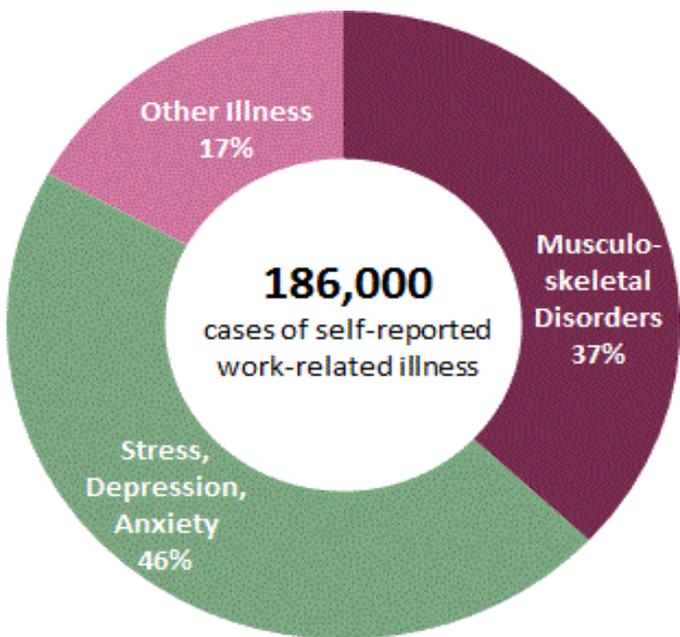
Dr Louise Grant  
Head of School Applied Social  
Studies University of Bedfordshire



# “The nature of the problem

- ▶ Rewarding but emotionally challenging work
  - ▶ High burnout, but high personal accomplishment
- ▶ High levels of stress, linked with:
  - ▶ Ill-health, absenteeism
  - ▶ Compassion fatigue, PTSD
  - ▶ Impaired service provision
  - ▶ Attrition: average working “life” is 8 years
- ▶ Rising stress and work-life conflict
  - ▶ The main reason for wishing to leave social work

# Wellbeing in health & social care



**5.7 million** working days lost



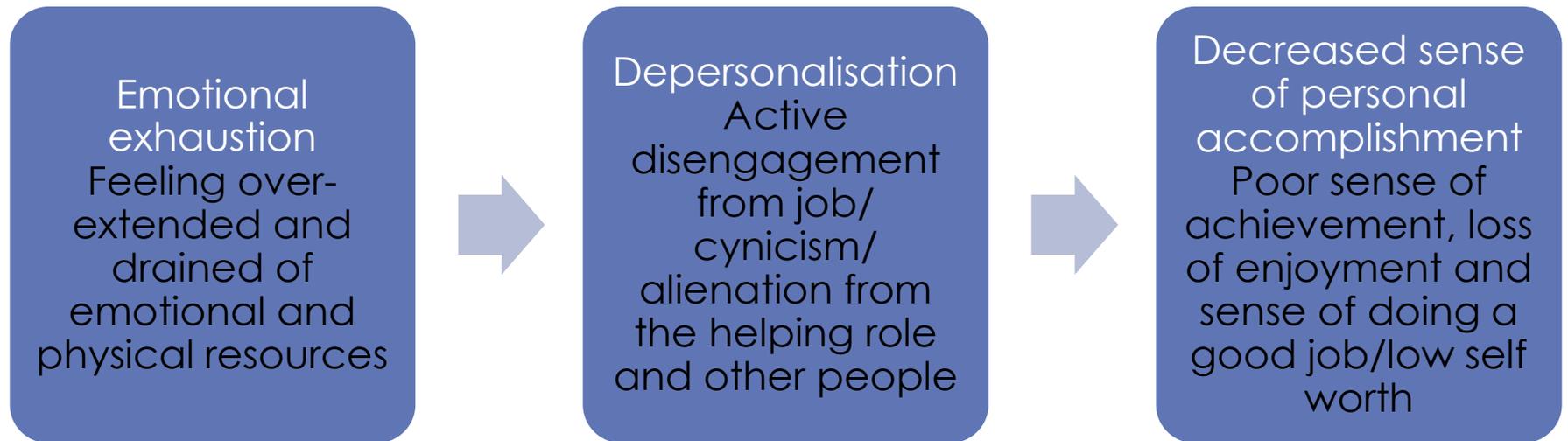
**Also high levels of 'presenteeism'**

**Health and social care:** The 2<sup>nd</sup> highest rate of work-related stress, anxiety and depression

Stress = Primary reason for wishing to leave

Source: Labour Force Survey

# Burnout – running on empty



# Burnout and engagement: a dual-process model

## Burnout and social workers

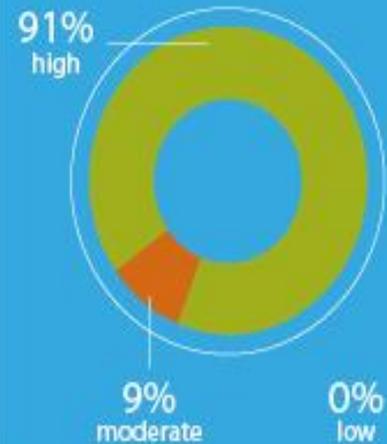
### Emotional Exhaustion



### Depersonalisation



### Personal Accomplishment



Community  
Care, 2015  
(n = 1359)

Dual-process model

# The importance of self-care, self-compassion and resilience

- ▶ *“Put on your own oxygen mask, before attempting to help others.”*
- ▶ Self compassion underpins resilience and wellbeing
- ▶ Self-care is not ‘selfish’ nor an ‘indulgence’ and can protect against burnout
- ▶ It is vital for long-term wellbeing and professional effectiveness – and a long, healthy and satisfying career
- ▶ A core competency
  - ▶ Professional Capability Framework for Social Work
  - ▶ Nursing and Midwifery Council



# What is self-compassion

- ▶ Self-compassion is having the same compassion towards yourself that you have towards others.

## Self Kindness



Being kind and supportive of ourselves when things go wrong, rather than being harshly self-critical

## Mindful



Recognising when we are stressed and use proactive coping strategies

## Sense of common humanity



Recognising that we all make mistakes, and need support.

# Importance of self-compassion and support

## Survey of 370 social workers

### Risk factors

- ▶ **Lack of self compassion:** risk factor for poor mental health and burnout
- ▶ **Work life conflict:** Risk factor for mental health, burnout. A good work life balance is protective.
- ▶ **Perfectionism:** Risk factor for mental health, burnout and poor work life balance



### Protective Factors

- ▶ **Self compassion:** Self compassion was an important resource, as it protects mental health, burnout etc.
- ▶ **Support:** SWs with more support had much better mental health work life balance and less likely to experience burnout. Also experienced less compassion fatigue & were more self compassionate.

Grant and Kinman 2018  
forthcoming

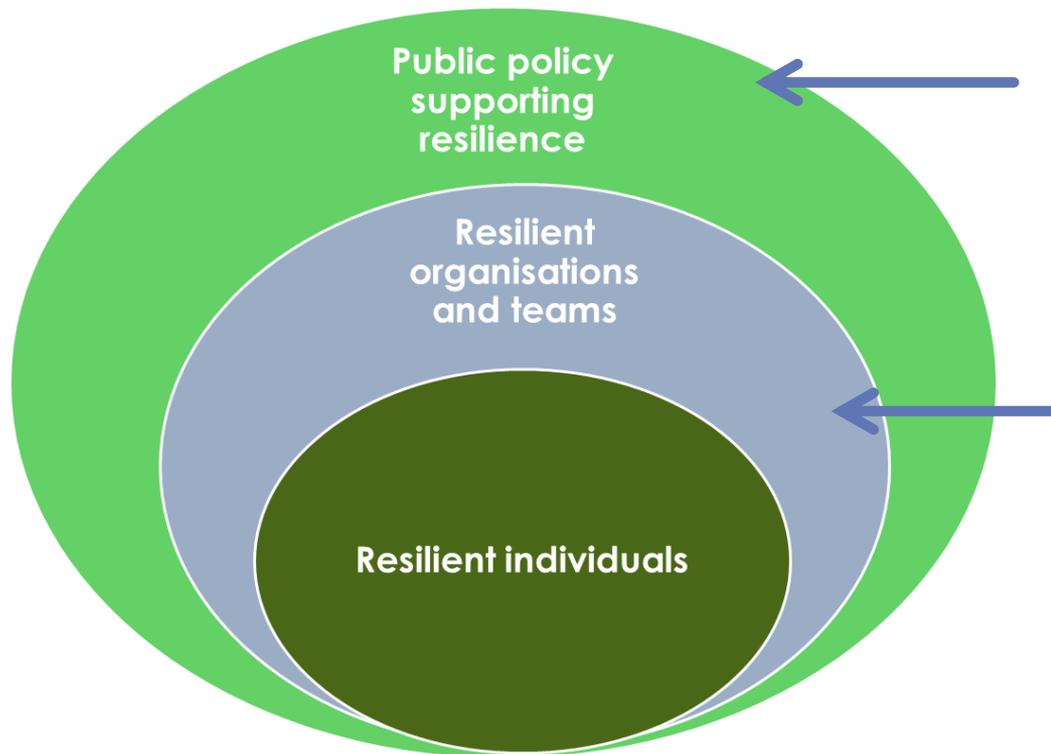


# Don't blame the victim!

- ▶ Most initiatives are individually focused - pathologising a 'failure' to cope?
- ▶ Is burnout a clinical disorder or a logical reaction to emotionally demanding work?
- ▶ HSE : Work should not be intrinsically hazardous
- ▶ What about the organisation's responsibility?



# Building resilience and wellbeing: a multi-level model



- Conducts regular organisational health checks
- Develops workload management and support initiatives
- Disseminates 'what works'

- Compassionate leaders create compassionate organisations.
- Point out positive behaviours and constructively challenge negative ones
- Manage workloads
- Builds support networks
- Prioritises self-care