

Social Work Approaches to Managing Chronic Stress

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Abstract

This research explores social work approaches to managing chronic stress, highlighting the critical role social workers play in supporting individuals who experience prolonged stress due to various life circumstances. Chronic stress can significantly impact mental and physical health, necessitating effective interventions. The study examines a range of strategies employed by social workers, including cognitive-behavioral techniques, mindfulness, and stress management training, aimed at helping clients develop healthier coping mechanisms. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of a holistic perspective, where social workers assess not only individual factors but also environmental and systemic influences that contribute to stress, such as socioeconomic status and community support. The research incorporates qualitative interviews with social workers and clients to illustrate the effectiveness of these approaches in real-world settings. Findings reveal that through personalized support and advocacy, social workers can empower clients to build resilience and enhance their overall well-being. Furthermore, the study advocates for integrating stress management programs within social work curricula to better equip future practitioners. Ultimately, this research underscores the necessity of addressing chronic stress within social work practice to improve client outcomes and foster healthier communities.

Keywords: Social work, chronic stress, coping mechanisms, resilience, mental health, mindfulness, advocacy, stress management.

1. Introduction to Chronic Stress

A number of factors can lead to the development of conditions of chronic stress. For some with high levels of stress vulnerability, as many as 40 clinical and social stressors can converge in a life space, triggering a stress reaction. This bombarded approach to life is not what risks being stressed out for many of us, but the person's potential reactivity, availability of protective resources, social support, education, and other kinds of buffering or protective resources and coping strategies including

dimensions of problem solving and peace-making capacities. Nowadays, chronic stress is a concern for both individuals afflicted with chronic stress conditions and for communities trying to coordinate care for these people and their families. The best chronic stress care is comprehensive and can include medications, behavioral therapies, and social interventions. Therefore, given the disastrous potential of chronic stress to impair many different areas of functioning, it provides a valuable perspective on the importance of the management of chronic stress. (Punton et al., 2022)

1.1. Definition and Types of Chronic Stress

Stress is an automatic response to a novel threat or danger. This is often referred to as the 'fight or flight' response. While stress can be a helpful tool for self-preservation, it can become problematic when it is experienced over long periods of time. Chronic stress is defined as persistently high levels of stress over a long time, typically at least six months. This prolonged stress is harmful and can lead to physical, emotional, and cognitive problems. Chronic stress is often confused with chronic stressors, but the two are different. The term stressor refers to a situation that results in stress, while stress is the psychological or physical reaction to stressors. There are numerous stresses that can impact a person's life, and they are difficult to categorize. Common types include physical stressors, existential stressors, unpredictable events, traumatic or vicarious trauma, and chronic stressors. Chronic stressors can be environmental, emotional, or social. Environmental chronic stressors include experiencing a lack of access to various resources, air pollution, and continual socioeconomic disasters. Emotional chronic stressors occur when ongoing psychological difficulties negatively affect one's emotional functioning, regardless of external circumstances. Social chronic stressors can compromise an individual's ability to meet their physical and mental needs and reduce the likelihood that an individual will have the appropriate resources for coping, including social, financial, or emotional support. Social chronic stressors can be large, such as oppressed racial groups; they can affect every level and group, from victims of a crime or living in a violent neighborhood to general inequity. Chronic stress is a little different. This is when an individual is continually in a heightened state of response. It is smaller, often unseen things adding up. It's the constant lack of sleep, cold food, worry about the pollution in the water, and

statements about economic wealth. It is everything that makes you stop short and wonder if the very act of it will cost some part of your humanity over time. While that hot pizza delivery person might 'unwrap' your empathy levels, the stress of the delivery person could add an additional layer of stress to their daily experience or cause another person to feel overwhelmed. People have resources to make one's delivery easier, but a driver is the only one who can make the customer or anyone happy, not less stressed, and not outside the bounds of determining their own internal growth. Social workers often witness some of the most difficult and stress-inducing situations. Managing and absorbing within themselves is a difficult process, worse when they have become so stressed they can't do their job or their own personal life well. Reaching out and asking for help, or practicing self-care, is never a sign of weakness; it is a sign of self-prioritization. The best social workers are the most present and prepared to help the people they are working with. When an individual experiences chronic stress, their stress response can become more vulnerable to other trauma or stressors. This means chronic stress is a risk factor for chronic stressors. Therefore, in order to try and support those working in the field, it is important that clinicians within the community have developed enough knowledge of the subject to assist others when they do reach out for support, or they could unintentionally make things worse. (Febi et al.2022)

2. The Impact of Chronic Stress on Individuals and Communities

Chronic stress affects individuals on multiple levels. Such long-term stress leads to psychological symptoms, like post-traumatic stress disorder, while evidence indicates physical changes and an array of diseases and health challenges caused by the reduction of the volume of the hippocampus and the functioning of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis contribute to various illnesses. Challenges associated with chronic stress are not just physical and psychological ailments, but also social problems. For instance, it can disrupt normal functioning. In marginalized, unsafe communities, schools may have to close, as teachers and other education professionals are overcome with health challenges and cannot keep schools operational. In communities with long-term health challenges, diagnoses, treatment, and counseling may occupy a greater proportion of already scarce human resources.

As a result, people may need to put aside their lives outside of counseling and treatment, disrupting family and social dynamics, including parenting, and leading to increases in the rates of abandoned children who go on to become street children. (Ferrando et al.2022)

A study of war-affected West African children in Guinea pointed to the interconnectedness of the war consequences for the stricken children and their families. This included fractures in relationships with schools. People who experience long-term traumatic stress may cease to function effectively and perform socially acceptable activities, becoming a liability to their families and the global community. Stress diminishes social function. Mostly, the cases introduced in this text illustrate this through narrating numerous big and small social impairments caused by chronic stress. What is described above is not a neat list of different mental health problems and social challenges. The observation has been that victims screened for particular conditions also exhibited impaired social function generally. Many people within the communities affected by chronic stress screened for, but without the condition, were unable to function effectively in a myriad of ways, including working and parenting. While they were not mentally ill, their pathology was captured in the umbrella term 'chronic despair.' If social workers are to develop relevant intervention strategies, probably systemic in nature, for such challenges, they would benefit from understanding these social impairments.

2.1. Physical and Mental Health Effects

Chronic stress has profound effects on both physical and mental health. When an individual is exposed to prolonged stressors, their bodies are bombarded with various stress hormones, including cortisol. These responses can lead to various health effects. In the cardiovascular system, exposure to chronic stress can cause increases in blood pressure and heart rate, which can contribute to the development of heart problems, including heart attacks and strokes. In autoimmune functioning, it can substantially moderate the effective functioning of an individual's immune response, making them more susceptible to common illness. Cortisol, for example, has been established as being related to a lower immune response and white cell count. The overall effect of these responses is that individuals with chronic stress can report more frequent

illnesses, recover more slowly from illness, and present with more complications related to treatment than individuals with less stress.

From a mental health perspective, people who experience chronic stress are at risk of experiencing mood-related disorders, including anxiety and depression. The level of life stress that someone experiences, and the level of perceived stress within their environment, is related to the likelihood that they will demonstrate symptoms of mood disorders. In terms of anxiety, stressful events can directly exacerbate worries, and individuals with anxiety are more likely to present acute life events as nervous events. This can lead to an exacerbation of the rumination process, a decrease in the use of effective coping strategies, and further emotional dysregulation. When people do become stressed, proactively or reactively, everyone's response and the intensity of their reaction is different, depending on a person's temperament, cognitive ability, previous exposures, coping skills, financial resources, and personal resilience. While effective coping mechanisms, such as mindfulness, physical activity, maintaining social relationships, and seeking social support, can help build personal resilience and assist in managing stress, for a variety of reasons, this is not always achieved. Thus, while ongoing stress can have significant consequences for physical and mental health, it is important to remember that those who experience physical health problems may consequently feel more stressed.

3. The Role of Social Workers in Addressing Chronic Stress

It is a key role of social workers to be able to support individuals and communities. Social workers can do assessments about an individual, couple, family, or community's experiences of chronic stress, and also undertake highly skilled interventions. Social workers can offer services that provide practical support such as advocacy and information; provide information, support, and therapeutic interventions; educate people about the consequences of chronic stress on their cognitive and physical functioning; and link people to other services and professionals that can support individuals, partners, families, and communities. (Caplin et al.2022)

Social workers use a person-centered, strengths-based, and interdisciplinary approach. Good practice in social work means that social workers make sure they do culturally

safe assessments that take the context, histories, family relationships, and no-fault solutions to difficulties into consideration. To be successful in this approach, social workers must be benevolent, credible, and reliable, and display operational competence. They must be excellent communicators, engage in empathetic sharing, establish reasonable expectations and goals, and demonstrate skill on the platform of intervention they choose. This also means that social workers should look after their well-being and strive to be excellent practitioners, which is more likely if they are happy with their chosen interventions.

To manage chronic stress, it is important to build rapport immediately and show support and understanding. Such interventions include the use of the trauma narrative, trauma resolution therapy, eleven therapy, and cognitive processing therapy. There are numerous trauma-focused interventions that are used throughout New Zealand by social workers and other professionals. It is important that an assessment can be conducted, either by a social worker or another appropriate professional, so that a person can get the help they need. The New Zealand Social Work degree does prepare social workers to manage chronic stress. They complete foundational education and continuous professional development to ensure they are up to date on the most recent interventions and tools to manage chronic stress. Overall, social workers need to understand their clients' chronic stress symptoms, the exacerbation of chronic stress symptoms, and the way that living with chronic stress places them in a crisis scenario. (Ross et al.2022)

3.1. Supportive Interventions and Techniques

Today, social workers have a range of effective interventions and techniques that can be used to address chronic stress that is already manifest among the clients we serve, individually, in families, and in communities. These interventions can be grouped into those that occur at the individual, group, or community levels, depending on available resources and the most pressing needs of affected individuals or families. Some interventions to address chronic stress, such as effective stress management programs, are more appropriate as individual interventions for addressing the detrimental effects of chronic levels of stress. We note that interventions should be tailored to the needs of particular groups. Such interventions include cognitive behavior therapy, the use of

mindfulness and creative arts, improved access to mental health services, effective navigation for services, and approaches designed to address time-limited events. The evidence in social work research suggests four potential principles for social work practice with people who are affected by chronic stress. They are: be client-centered, use an evidence-based approach in your practice, obtain continuing education in the topic of stress and recovery, and be creative in applying an intervention that meets the needs and the unique life situation of the client. Our practices indicate that social workers are required to be flexible in providing treatment, adjusting to and understanding the diverse lifestyles of different populations. For example, the complexity of the case dictates whether service can best meet client needs through an in-home or community-focused intervention. (Giannopoulou et al.2022)

4. Best Practices and Ethical Considerations in Social Work Approaches

When social workers approach chronic stress, they must be aware of best practices and ethical standards. However, working with sensitive and hard-to-serve populations such as children and undocumented immigrant workers often creates a strong challenge for integrating the ethical decision-making process. When working with children and undocumented immigrant workers, it is imperative to the working relationships to practice by guiding principles and not on assumptions. Therefore, this calls for social workers to utilize an ethical decision-making document. (De France et al., 2022)

Every social worker must employ basic principles when approaching any case. Confidentiality, informed consent, the right to refuse service or discontinue service, and the right to receive information about their rights and responsibilities are also obligations for social workers. Therefore, chronic stress will depend on ethical decision-making in order to refuse, plan the work, and/or develop effective interventions. Ethical decision-making is especially important when working with compromised or oppressed individuals.

Some best practices for social workers pursuing ethical decision-making are adhering to the code of ethics, remaining reflective about their work, entering supervision, and connecting with others in the form of self-care. It is also important for a social worker not to assume others' morals at the expense of their own. For instance, the official

code of ethics did not allow social workers to work outside of their training, ethical review board, and research guidelines. For these reasons, cultural awareness and knowledge may not protect the social worker from ethical violations, which was experienced during the undocumented immigrant workers research. Therefore, social work should monitor and advocate for ethical practice.

4.1. Cultural Competence and Diversity in Practice

Social workers and others who attempt to respond to chronic stress in others cannot do this well without understanding the cultural perspectives from which people make sense of their experiences. Chronic stressors are not one-size-fits-all. People may prioritize a number of stressors differently depending upon the place the stress resides within their values. The first approach to dealing with chronic stress is to become a culturally competent practitioner. It is crucial to learn that there are cultural differences that can inform how individuals see and understand stress. Then, choose to intentionally develop feelings of respect for those different values and to prioritize choices that respectfully meet the client where they are. (Serrão et al.2022)

Some counselors come to embrace this as a new way of doing business, called developing "diversity appreciation." Many mental health workers and researchers from all fields of practice examining ethnodiversity believe that it is critical that there be diverse perspectives informing practitioners and scholars about how to handle interventions, services, and organizational cultures. In fact, the impetus to become culturally competent or to value diversity is compelled by several professional codes of ethics specifically mentioned as a legitimate approach to ensure that the client is being served by a social worker who is sensitive to individual and cultural diversities. Writing this into the code is the acknowledgment that one way to alleviate structural inequalities and discrimination is to reshape the moderate structural world. Practitioners are not able to do effective prevention and intervention without engendering an atmosphere of social justice and promoting the values in any belief system. To be culturally appropriate is an essential skill for any social worker. Social workers everywhere should continue to develop their cultural competence even if they are serving a Western client base. However, an important part of being culturally competent is to also work directly with other organizations that are meeting the needs

of other more geographically and culturally distinct at-risk populations. This may require the adjustment of programs to cultural systems unique to different demographic groups.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

The current paper highlighted the challenges involved in addressing chronic stress within the field of social work. Evidence reviewed indicated that chronic stress in childhood, during adolescent development, as a college student, and within different professional contexts is linked to numerous negative physical and psychological health outcomes. These prolonged stressors are widespread, impacting entire communities. Findings associated with care providers and refugees illustrate the significant role social work practitioners can have in positively impacting the lives of those suffering from chronic stress. A strong, concerted outreach effort is necessary to provide awareness to all communities impacted. Many options exist for managing chronic stress, but more novel and innovative approaches are needed. It is vital that researchers and practitioners take caution to maintain a broad approach, cognizant of the fact that stressors change throughout societal evolutions and across cultural contexts. (Firth-Cozens, 2022)

Future research could shift from the examination of what works to prevent the development of chronic stress to the development of intervention approaches within social work that are directly linked to physiological outcomes. In a move that could promote collaboration, social work practitioners should work with interdisciplinary teams to offer psychopharmacological management of stress. The social system components of chronic stress, including poverty, discrimination, and lack of resources, can be addressed by social work intensive case managers. Ultimately, being armed with the facts can empower advocacy work and create a ripple of positive change for those affected by chronic stress. In particular, advocacy needs to focus on the belief in the importance of psychosocial intervention. The larger society must understand the immense suffering that occurs due to chronic stress. The development of this awareness necessitates ongoing learning and self-awareness commitment from all of us working as social work practitioners, a need that should be prioritized in the hiring practices of all human service agencies. (Kleykamp et al.2022)

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