Handout 8: How to Cope with the Stress of Being a Case Manager

Professionals with Case Management responsibilities are particularly susceptible to stress because many of the factors that contribute to stress are integral to their work. Among these factors are the nature of the clients, the stresses of dealing with bureaucracy and a personal tendency to react negatively in stressful situations.

Much of the work of Case Management involves clients who have very complex and long-term difficulties, children who are at risk, adults who have disabilities or are elderly, and people with medical problems such as AIDS or cancer. Workers require a degree of expertise that is only achieved after years of study and experience. If you are a new worker, make sure you have a mentor/supervisor who can guide you. If a case is outside your experience, say so and ask for help.

Often Case Managers can work with clients quite successfully but it is the bureaucracy in the end that gets them down. Large caseloads, under resourced agencies and little recognition for a job well done can cause workers a great deal of stress. One of the hardest words for dedicated professionals to say is "No more" but it has to be done if workers are to continue offering a professional service.

People who choose to work as Case Managers have certain personality traits such as sensitivity to the sufferings of others, the ability to show empathy, a willingness to help others - that make them vulnerable to stress. To survive they must find time to plan and reflect, maybe redesign their job or parts of it. Having someone trustworthy to talk to about work can also help. But sometimes Case Managers must take the decision to move out of those very emotional areas and give their minds and bodies time to recuperate.

What's the Problem?

Stress is the body's natural response to pressures or stressful situations we find ourselves in and which we are not certain we can cope with effectively.

There are many different levels of stress that can be produced in response to any given situation. The level of stress you experience depends on your personality, your state of health and many other factors. For example, we all respond differently to tasks such as speaking in public, taking on a new or difficult job, or undergoing an examination or inspection.

People respond to stressful situations in different ways. Stressful situations can trigger different responses. These will vary between individuals. Some may be physical, some may be psychological and some may be behavioural.

Your response to stress depends on how vulnerable you are at the time. For example, you are more likely to suffer from stress if you have a cardiovascular disease or hypertension (high blood pressure). Your personality can also affect the way you respond to stress. If you tend to have an anxious personality then you will be less likely to control your response to stress than someone who has a high level of self esteem or positive self regard.
Warning Signs

The following list of symptoms may be indicators of too much stress.

**Physical Symptoms:**

- Change in appetite/weight change
- Increased drug, alcohol, tobacco use
- Digestive upsets
- Pounding heart
- Frequent colds
- Headaches
- Muscle aches
- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Restlessness
- Teeth grinding
- Rash

**Emotional Symptoms:**

- Anxiety
- Bad temper/irritability
- Exhaustion
- Frustration
- The "blues"
- Mood swings
- Nightmares
- Depression
- Nervous laughter
- Crying spells
- Worrying
- Becoming easily discouraged
**Mental Symptoms:**

- Exhaustion
- Poor concentration
- Lower productivity/lack of new ideas
- Forgetfulness, spacing out
- Dull senses/boredom
- Negative attitude
- Confusion/whirling mind

**Spiritual Symptoms:**

- Exhaustion
- Feelings of emptiness, doubt, cynicism or apathy
- Loss of meaning or direction
- Being unforgiving
- Martyrdom
- Looking for "magic". Needing to "prove" self

**Relational Symptoms:**

- Depersonalization of work and clients
- Isolation/loneliness
- Lack of intimacy
- Lowered sexual drive
- Clamming up/hiding
- Intolerance/lashing out
- Resentment/nagging

May still need section on

Placement/context of case management Eg SAAP services; JJ

Case Conferences

Indicators of abuse