



**DEFINING MOMENTS IN SOCIAL WORK: LEARNING IN THE MIDST
OF THE STORM**

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Learning in the Midst of the Storm**

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Abstract

Crises are inevitable. Social workers, prepared to help others address life difficulties, also encounter their own critical challenges. This presentation allows for discussion of the expectations and barriers regarding professionals who experience great personal trials. As a way of coping with these storms of life, questions are posed regarding ability to know when and how to interrupt work to take care of self or loved ones. Adherence to NASW Codes 4.03 and 4.05 as a professional responsibility is reviewed. Learning objectives include: the identification and development of skills to create and maintain balance between personal and professional life; specific strategies for use during crisis, as well as a method to proactively maintain healthy boundaries; and, identification of process for faith communities to facilitate authentic non-judgmental attitudes and expectations about professional helpers in crisis.

Defining Moments in Social Work: Learning in the Midst of the Storm

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Introduction

Social workers face times of crisis. Some crises are more easily understood and therefore people facing these challenges may receive support more easily than people facing challenges that are viewed as less acceptable. Social workers are trained to view dilemmas from an ethical perspective as these impact clients and those who serve them. However, social workers need to more closely define the parameters of crisis and any inherent dilemmas in terms of impact spiritually, emotionally, mentally, financially, relationally, as well as professionally. Defining these parameters will help social workers comprehend the extent and determine options for events, predicaments and situations which are overwhelming at a particular point of time.

Some say “people enter the helping professions as a direct need to take care of their own issues.” This bias discounts the gifting in the lives of professional social workers who enter the field in response to the call and the equipping of the Lord. Moreover, this bias may reinforce reluctance on the part of Christian social workers to disclose personal crises in healthy ways. There may be a fear that disclosing personal information to the wrong persons, or at the wrong time, could result in judgment or even negative consequences such as job loss or perception of decreased ability and availability, which of course would only add another layer of problems.

Christian social workers know to rely on the Lord as they go through trials yet there is also a great need for support and encouragement from friends, family and colleagues. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galations 6:2, New International Version) Is there more that we can learn from these crucial times in life?

Experiencing the Crisis

The social work career begins with excitement and enthusiasm, yet nothing fully prepares social workers for the reality of managing urgent personal situations while also working in a demanding career. If social workers knew what is required to maintain the balance between personal and professional life, how many would still choose the profession? This rhetorical question gives us pause to ponder what we may not know about assisting other professionals during their personal hardships? Such inquiry requires authenticity and a willingness to be transparent, and, in turn, may help lower the rate of burn-out and departure from the profession.

It is time to examine this issue so that individually and collectively professional social workers are healthier and can serve others with excellence. Herein are some initial questions:

1. During times of personal challenge, when are personal efforts and daily activities of self-care not enough to maintain a healthy equilibrium or address the challenge?
2. When facing personal or family crisis (health, relationship, economic or other), is the extent known to which the crisis impacts the social worker, family and work?
3. As a professional who has been trained to serve others in the challenges and crises of life, what expectations do you have about professional social workers who seek help?

As Christians in the helping professions, we must learn from these times in the journey. Then, in turn, we will be able to teach others to help other social workers who face crises.

“Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, until each appears before God in Zion.” (Psalm 84:5-7)

Examine the Crisis

By its very definition, a crisis is overwhelming. Yet, before panic sets in, what does it truly look like? Under which general category might a particular crisis fall? Although there may be a reluctance to begin such an investigation, we must complete this simple task (name the crisis). If we fail to do it, then we are not dissimilar to the child awakened by a nightmare: too afraid to tell mommy or daddy about the dream for fear that naming it aloud will make it more real. Just like the child gripped by fear of a nightmare, when we do not name the crisis we fall prey to all the same roadblocks as that child: fatigue, anxiety and depression.

It is helpful to take a step back and examine it from an objective perspective. Identifying the category under which it might fall, helps social workers to better realize how these may be managed. When we name the crisis, then we can begin the work of addressing the crisis. Some common crisis categories are: Betrayal (friend, spouse, family, fellow Christian, co-worker); Unexpected Changes (job loss, home repossession, death of a loved one); Lost Innocence (personal or a loved one's experience of abuse or assault); and, Physical Issues (accident, disease, terminal illness).

Negotiation of NASW Code of Ethics

Despite the challenges of a career in social work, we choose this profession because the investment in individuals and communities has a great, possibly immeasurable return. We appreciate the opportunity to be catalysts and support others as they make changes that help them to live more fulfilling lives. Nevertheless, there are days or times we may feel inept, inadequate or unable to fulfil the expectations we have for ourselves. These periods are most likely to be when we experience crises in our personal lives. When we use the benchmarks of the NASW Code of Ethics, then we can be assured that we are taking the right steps.

4.03 Private Conduct

Social workers should not permit their private conduct to interfere with their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities.

4.05 Impairment

(a) Social workers should not allow their own personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties to interfere with their professional judgment and performance or to jeopardize the best interests of people for whom they have a professional responsibility.

(b) Social workers whose personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties interfere with their professional judgment and performance should immediately seek consultation and take appropriate remedial action by seeking professional help, making adjustments in workload, terminating practice, or taking any other steps necessary to protect clients and others.” (NASW, 2008).

“The NASW *Code of Ethics* is intended to serve as a guide to the everyday professional conduct of social workers” (NASW, 2008). The Code of Ethics provides clear standards for practice, professional boundaries, ethical dilemmas, as well as clear mandates regarding ability to serve clients effectively and when to step back from professional practice to address personal issues.

When we adhere to the NASW Code of Ethics and thereby practice introspection and seek help from trusted and experienced ethical practitioners, then social workers can realistically assess the effect that crises have on professional as well as personal lives. In turn, we are able to be more mindful of dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors. Conversely when we are less intentional and move through life on automatic pilot, we are less aware of our own needs. When

this happens, we can too late learn that emotional reserves are nearly depleted. When our emotional reserves are compromised, we no longer have the capacity to be as effective in our professional roles. Our performance suffers, and, of course, our clients do not receive the best that we have to offer in our work with them. Then life becomes much more than unmanageable. The Code of Ethics is an invaluable tool for social workers experiencing crises.

Learning Objective # 1

Identify and develop skills that balance personal and professional life. Discover personal point at which one must seek professional help for navigating crisis.

There is a time when compartmentalizing our professional and personal life does not work for us or for those we serve. In answer to the question, “During times of personal challenge, when are personal efforts and daily activities of self-care not enough to maintain a healthy equilibrium or address the challenge?”, we suggest the following formula.

Actions that compromise physical/mental/emotional/spiritual health ➡ Disequilibrium

This formula is simple, yet do we regularly give serious consideration to the state of various areas of personal health and the effect on equilibrium and functioning? We need to practice the skill of self-examination to have balance in life. Consider the following fitness analogy.

- When an athlete is injured, there is pain.
- When an athlete is ill, capacity, endurance, and agility are compromised.
- When an athlete is over-worked, skills are not as precise or effective.
- When an athlete only focuses on training, interest in other activities is lost/neglected.
- When an athlete becomes her/his own personal expert, the knowledge and wisdom of coaches and trainers is a careless after thought. These invaluable supports are discarded. The lie takes hold: “I can do this alone.”

Using the fitness analogy we recognize even the best athlete is an imperfect human. Similarly we can accept that although social workers are rigorously trained, we are also simply human, not super human! We have many skills, but just as the best athlete needs a trusted coach and team, the committed effective social worker needs consistent quality supervision and valuable dialogue with colleagues. There is great wisdom in knowing that our own skills alone are not enough to guide us through the crises. Furthermore, as Christian social workers, we need to be careful not to compartmentalize our spirituality, especially when seeking help. Our faith is our strength and an essential component that defines us.

Learning Objective # 2

Identify steps to seek help and proactively adhere to healthy boundaries when in crisis.

Social workers expect those they serve to do the uncomfortable, which often means change. Why do we think that we should be different? So then we must ask the question, “When facing personal or family crisis (health, relationship, economic or other), is the extent known to which the crisis impacts the social worker, family and work?” Doing self-examination when life is in a crisis state can be quite arduous, and may even seem counter-intuitive in that one may wonder if there is enough emotional and mental reserve to complete such a process. Nevertheless crises may require radical change. So we suggest a format which may help structure this self-examination: **RADICAL CRISIS RECOVERY PLAN** (see Diagram 1).

The next question that requires thoughtful consideration is “As a professional who has been trained to serve others in the challenges and crises of life, what expectations do you have about professional social workers who seek help?” It is likely that many of us would say we support a professional seeking help, yet unless we have done it ourselves when needed, can we actually say we support this action?

It is hoped that the steps outlined in the diagram will prove helpful to social workers in crises as well as the professionals who assist them during these challenging times. Adherence to these steps can be an effective strategy to address the pervasiveness of the effects of crisis in the life of social workers who have dedicated their lives to helping others meet their own life challenges.

Learning Objective # 3

Identify how personal faith and faith communities can take steps to develop authentic non-judgmental attitudes and expectations about professional helpers in crisis.

“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the LORD. (Isaiah 1:18)

It is wonderful to have a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on and someone who reminds us that we will come through this storm. However, we need to take care of who we allow into the storm with us! Therefore, beware of ‘Job’s comforters’ defined as persons who are well intended but disastrous in their delivery of assistance. Often they do not know the depth of our emotions or realize the full extent of the challenges that appear insurmountable to us.

It is critical that help be sought from those who have the education, training and skill to make a difference in the midst of our storm. Characteristics of that person would include: demonstrated integrity; ability to maintain confidences; proven record of surviving their own storms; and, not connected to us in a professional capacity. Sometimes we will find these persons in the faith community and other times, persons within the faith community may assist in the referral.

If the faith community has not already done so, they can establish protocol and provide training for key responders who will assist social workers in crises to experience authentic non-judgmental attitudes. When the social workers in crises also hold positions of leadership within the faith community, then there should be a process to grant grace to step back from church responsibilities without stepping away from the support by the faith community.

Conclusion

The social work career begins with excitement and enthusiasm, yet nothing fully prepares social workers for the reality of managing urgent personal situations while also working in a demanding career. Social workers, prepared to help others address life difficulties, also encounter their own crises.

The NASW Code of Ethics provides clear standards for practice, professional boundaries, ethical dilemmas, as well as clear mandates regarding ability to serve clients effectively and when to step back from professional practice to address personal issues. When we adhere to the NASW Code of Ethics, practice introspection and seek help from experienced ethical practitioners, then social workers can realistically assess the effect that crises have on their professional as well as personal lives.

Self-examination, when life is in a crisis state can be quite arduous, and may even seem counter-intuitive in that one may wonder if there is enough emotional and mental reserve to complete such a process. Nevertheless crises may require radical change. A format which may help structure this self-examination is suggested and it is hoped that it will prove helpful.

Resolving a crisis takes faith as well as courage. Christian social workers must rely on the mercy and grace of God to sustain them during these storms of life. He also provides us with key people to help us in the midst of the storm, if we will simply seek them. By maintaining hope that the God of all comfort, who brought us to this journey, remains with us, sustains us and prepares us for greater things, then we can face each storm as it comes. It is this hope and assurance that will produce the defining moment.

Diagram 1

RADICAL CRISIS RECOVERY PLAN
Recognize-Acknowledge-Determine-Inventory-Calm-Alert-Lean

- 1. Recognize the crisis for what it is and for what it is not.**
 - What is happening? Who are the players?
 - What is the dilemma?
- 2. Acknowledge that there is impact as well as consequence if crisis is not addressed.**
 - It is not about self-sufficiency or about having all the answers.
 - What is your baseline? When did you depart from it? Was it healthy to begin with?
 - What are the themes which you have dealt with well or not so well in the past?
 - Bring the “aha moments” to the table.
- 3. Determine who to invite to partner with you.**
 - Spiritually
 - Relationally
 - Professionally
- 4. Inventory your strengths, needs, supports and obligations.**
 - Timing is everything: Postpone anything that is not urgent.
 - Resource allocation: Know when personal reserves are lower than normal/needed.
 - Realistically scrutinize needs. Do not be a martyr!
 - Decide supports and affiliations from which you can disconnect, even temporarily.
 - Eliminate some obligations: accept that God has prepared others to step in.
- 5. Calm the systems**
 - Calm the systems over which you have some influence. Ex: support staff may be relieved when you choose to not share details even when they ask; therefore no need for them to respond or react to new developments. (Layer of insulation.)
 - Calm your own system. Take care of you - invest in you. It is amazing how quickly anticipatory stress will be replaced by more peace, calm and solitude.
- 6. Alert only those who need to know about changes you make and inform about updates.**
 - Include those closest to you. Inform them you have a plan (though they need not know all the details). A good boundary statement you can use is “If there was any other way that I could ____, I would, but this is my plan and I am sticking to it.”
 - Include those who need to know at work, such as the Human Resources Director who is bound by confidentiality. Their support is important regarding curtailing your responsibilities on the job, especially if you anticipate resistant.
- 7. Lean on the LORD as you walk through each day.**
 - Pray for each victory even as you seek the Lord for answers to the great issues.
 - Forgive even the smallest of slights and insults, as these come when and from whom you least expect. To carry this pain is too great a burden. Let them all go.
 - Even when you don’t understand, thank the Lord at all times. (1 Thess. 5:18.)

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REFERENCES

National Association of Social Workers (2008). NASW Code of Ethics. Washington DC:
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