

“I Don’t Know Where MY Job Ends”

Workplace Stress and Social Support in Domestic Violence Prevention*

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Susan pulled her car into the parking lot and took a deep breath. Today was her first official day as the new director of Harbor Safe House (HSH), a nonprofit domestic violence prevention organization that provided safe shelter, peer counseling, and other services to survivors of domestic violence across three counties. HSH consisted of 12 full-time staff members, three interns, and 10 volunteers. Susan had years of experience leading social work organizations, but she suspected that her tenure at HSH would be different. Susan opened the car door and turned on her smile as she hit the security buzzer and was let in through the door of the HSH center.

“Good morning!” Anna, her assistant, beamed. “I just updated your calendar. Let me know how I can help you prep for the board meeting tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Anna,” Susan replied as she made her way down the hallway to her office. She was facing pressures from all sides, and she knew the board would want answers, sooner rather than later. The board consisted of 13 members, who were each concerned about the future of HSH. During her final interview before getting the job offer, Susan was forewarned about the tensions between shelter and office staff that were exacerbated because of the different locations. Specifically, nine office staff members were housed in the main administrative building where Susan’s office was also located. The remaining three staff members and volunteers worked in the shelter. Even though the shelter was only about 2 miles from the administrative office, staff and volunteers perceived that the distance was more like

100 miles! Susan was also alerted to the communication issues between management and subordinates and the need to secure more grant funding in an increasingly competitive environment. Susan wondered if these issues were causing the high staff turnover or if it was something else. She turned on her computer and prepared to tackle her to-do list.

In the office at the shelter house, Daria slumped into a chair at the conference table, where another advocate, Tanesha, was reading through a stack of survivor intake folders. Tanesha looked up to find Daria staring despondently at the stack of files.

“Is something wrong?” Tanesha asked.

“I’ve been having a difficult time with some of my clients. I’m working with a woman who calls me almost every day with long lists of needs like clothes and school supplies for her kids, assistance with paperwork for health benefits, and concerns about how she is going to pay her bills. I know we have a lot of resources available to assist survivors, but lately I feel like the downside of this assistance is that survivors think we can do everything for them. This particular survivor, who once stayed at the shelter, now lives over an hour away, and I’ve been driving back and forth to her house a few times a week, in addition to covering visits in my other areas. I haven’t been getting home before nine o’clock every night, and then I’m here again at 8:30 each morning. I know I just earned my B.A. degree in social work six months ago, but my coursework didn’t go over when and how to say no to clients. I just don’t know where my job starts and where it ends. Everything feels like a crisis or an emergency, and my nerves are shot. It doesn’t help that I can’t talk to my boyfriend about all of this because of confidentiality.”

Before Tanesha could respond, the crisis line rang. “I’ll take this one,” Tanesha said. Daria began to look through the intake files of survivors staying in the shelter while Tanesha talked with the caller. Daria couldn’t believe they had processed six intakes last week and two new ones this week. She overheard Tanesha on the crisis line, and it sounded as if another survivor was going to come in that evening. That would make 30 total in the shelter, one of the highest occupancy rates HSH had experienced in months.

“You read my mind,” Tanesha remarked to Daria as she hung up the receiver. “This shelter is getting fuller every day, and our volunteer advocate numbers are dwindling. They are the lowest I’ve seen in the three years I’ve been working here. In fact, shouldn’t there be a volunteer here right now?” Just then, the office line rang. Daria picked up the receiver to hear Rose, a volunteer advocate, on the other end of the line.

“Hi, Rose. It’s Daria. Please don’t tell me you’re calling to cancel your shift?” Daria halfheartedly joked with Rose.

“Yes, Daria,” responded Rose. “Unfortunately, I do need to cancel my shift for later today. I thought I would be okay after last week, but I’m not. You remember

what happened? Carol's abuser followed her here to the shelter, on her way home from work. He started pounding on the door, yelling profanities, and threatened to kill Carol if she didn't come out. I was the only advocate at the shelter, and I called the police. But it was a very traumatic experience. I don't feel like the volunteer training taught me how to respond to a situation like that. Honestly, I'm very frustrated that I was the only volunteer with a shift during that time, and to make matters worse, I couldn't get in contact with any staff members 'on call' to help me out. I need a bit more time to recoup before I pick up my shifts again."

"Thanks for letting us know, Rose," Daria replied. "I'll be sure to pass your message along to our new director, who said that supporting our volunteers is one of her top priorities. Please let us know when you would like to return. You are a wonderful volunteer." Daria hung up the receiver and looked at Tanesha.

"It sounds like Rose is not coming in tonight. We need to keep and take care of the volunteers we do have and recruit even more," Tanesha commented. "The volunteers complete a rigorous 40-hour training program and initially seem so motivated to work with us. But our volunteer retention rate is extremely low, and I think it might get worse given that we just lost another volunteer coordinator. That is the second coordinator to leave the position in less than six months. I thought Carin was doing a great job as the volunteer coordinator, but I guess Megan, the shelter manager, didn't agree. The last I saw of Carin, she was exiting Megan's office and wiping tears away from her face," Tanesha continued as she gathered up her purse and intake paperwork. "I hate to leave you to deal with the shelter on your own, Daria, but I have an appointment with a woman at The Sandwich Shop. She has been married to her husband for 10 years, and she is finally thinking about leaving. I am hopeful that I can help her get out of an awful situation." Daria wished Tanesha luck.

Tanesha arrived at The Sandwich Shop only to find it empty with a few employees laughing behind the counter. She ordered her sixth cup of coffee for the day, sat down at a table, and started to comb through the file of the woman she was supposed to meet. This woman had been beaten up for the fourth time that week, and the most recent time had sent her to the emergency room, where she was told that she might not regain full vision in her right eye. The woman had two small children, a four-year-old boy and a toddler who was only a year old. After reading through the file for a second time and finishing her cup of coffee, Tanesha decided the woman was not going to show up. She began to gather up her things, checked her phone, and saw that she had four missed messages from the shelter.

As she started listening to her messages, a young woman in her early 30s with a bandage over her right eye hurriedly opened the front door and frantically looked around. Tanesha gently raised her hand for the woman to notice. Reluctantly, the woman walked over to her.

"Please, sit down," Tanesha said in a calm voice. The woman nervously scanned the perimeter of The Sandwich Shop. After about 30 seconds, she sat down. Tanesha then asked her if she had started making formal plans to leave her abuser. Tanesha noticed that her unbandaged eye was welling up with tears as she said, "I gotta leave. But I'm scared. If I leave, Daniel is going to try to keep the kids. I know he will hurt them if I leave. And even if I leave, I know he will find me."

Tanesha listened to her story and put her hand on the woman's cold and trembling hand. Tanesha asked, "What can I do to help you prepare to leave? I have all kinds of resources to share with you, and we can even apply for some low-income housing in the area, though that probably won't come through for another three months. But it would be good to get the process started."

The woman replied, "I know I need to leave, but I'm not ready yet." With that, she jumped out of her chair and ran out the door, leaving Tanesha feeling as if she had failed.

When Tanesha returned to the shelter, she saw Daria on the phone and crumpled papers strewn everywhere in the shelter office. There was also a stench coming from the kitchen, possibly from a pile of dirty dishes or spoiling food. Knowing that she should begin to clean, Tanesha instead sat down in her chair and put her head in her arms. Daria ended her call and told Tanesha that she was about to leave to pick up another woman to bring her back to the shelter. As she prepared to walk out the door, Daria asked, "You okay?" After a long pause, Tanesha answered, "I just don't feel like I am doing my job very well. I try to help these women, but they don't accept the help. I try to talk to them, but I feel like everything I say is wrong. And this office is a total wreck, and I am too tired to do anything about it."

The crisis line rang. As Tanesha reached for the phone, she said, "Maybe if we could find a way to get the new director to come over here, we could show her that we are overworked and we lack the support to do our jobs." Tanesha waved to Daria as she walked out the door.

Later that evening, Susan let her mind wander while washing the dishes. Her husband, Bob, said, "You've had a long first day. Let me do that for you."

"Thanks for offering, but you know I find washing dishes to be therapeutic. I need to prioritize the different needs at HSH. The board wants me to focus on the big picture and not get bogged down with day-to-day issues. But we can't afford to have any more staff or volunteer turnover. Some staff and volunteers are clearly experiencing workplace stress and nearing the point of burnout. The work they do is important but also challenging, and the rewards are few and far between. How can I provide them with the support they need with the limited resources we have? I read an article that said talking about emotional stresses in your life can be therapeutic and healing. And I can see how this might be beneficial, yet we're constrained by rules of confidentiality. It's often the case that emotions fester and

brew inside. No wonder so many employees and volunteers leave after only working there for a few months."

Bob put his arms around Susan's waist and replied, "I know you'll figure out the best way to approach the challenges at HSH. You always do." Bob kissed Susan on the cheek. Susan finished putting the last dirty dish in the dish rack, turned the light out in the kitchen, and retired to the family room. She wondered if she would be able to focus on anything else besides her work. Could she turn it off?

KEY TERMS

Social Support - the activity of caring, comprising messages and behaviors that provide assistance and comfort to distressed others.

Workplace Stress - cognitive or emotional experiences of overload or inadequacy to cope with professional obligations and duties.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Workplace Stress

1. What are the main sources of workplace stress experienced by the different characters?
2. Why did Tanesha feel as if she "failed" with the woman at The Sandwich Shop? What would it look like if she succeeded?
3. What kind of strategies would you recommend to nonprofit staff and volunteers to avoid workplace stress? How can they learn to "turn it off" when they are not at work?

Social Support

4. What kind of training and support should HSH provide for volunteers, like Rose, so they are better prepared to handle difficult situations? What kind of training and support should staff receive?
5. How can nonprofit staff, like Tanesha and Daria, provide social support to their clients and also to one another?

General Stress and Social Support in Nonprofit Organizations

6. How much of a role should management play in providing support to nonprofit organization staff and volunteers? What should that role look like?
7. How can volunteers be recruited (and rewarded) to work at nonprofit organizations that require working in stressful conditions?

8. How can nonprofit staff and volunteers have a safe context to talk about their feelings when they are explicitly told to not talk about any of the work or clients because of issues of confidentiality?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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KEYWORDS

domestic violence, workplace stress, social support, volunteers

*This case study is based on ethnographic research conducted at a domestic violence prevention organization that resulted in publications in *JACR* and *Communication Currents*. The analysis that informs this situation comes from interviews with staff and volunteers who were experiencing role confusion, stress, and burnout. Staff and volunteers were looking for ways to effectively support one another while also empowering survivors of domestic violence.