

A black and white photograph of a snowy landscape. A path of snow leads from the foreground towards the horizon, flanked by several utility poles with cross-arms. The sky is overcast and grey. The overall mood is desolate and quiet.

Professional Burnout:

Are Social Workers as Crispy as we Think?

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Introduction

A little about me...

A little about you...

- This presentation focuses on burnout among social workers. Includes: historical & empirical information, finding from current research on the topic, & suggestions for identifying and managing burnout.
- Just for fun ~ did you know there is a website dedicated to burnout among social worker's? (<http://www.friedsocialworker.com/>) ~ but more about this later...



Defining “Professional Burnout”

- Professional burnout defined:
 - Freudenberger (1974; 1986) credited with introducing the term as a concept – borne from the field of engineering (refers to energy transfer & loss). Term converted from physical to human services realm.
 - Over time, “burnout” can negatively impact workers mentally & emotionally in their attitudes, judgments, & perceptions.
 - Burnout further defined by Pines & Maslach (1978). This is the beginning of the empirical study of burnout began – continues today.



Defining “Professional Burnout”

- A process in which a previously committed professional disengages from their work due to stress experienced in the workplace (Cherniss, 1980).
- “Fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980, p. 13).
- “A syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do ‘people-work’ of some kind. A key aspect of the burnout syndrome is increased feelings of emotional exhaustion” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 99)



Defining “Professional Burnout”

- Early Pines & Maslach (1978) research on social worker burnout revealed several predictors related to high levels of burnout:
 - Larger client-to-staff ratios resulted in less job satisfaction among social workers,
 - Higher percentages of schizophrenic patients in a social workers caseload resulted in higher burnout,
 - Higher numbers of staff & institutional meetings reduces job satisfaction,
 - Higher levels of job satisfaction are found among those with higher levels of formal social work education,
 - The number of hours worked per week were highly predictive of burnout ~ more hours = less satisfaction, fewer hours = greater satisfaction.



Other burnout-related concepts (brief)

❑ Occupational Tedium: Pines & Kafry (1978). Based on 3 general areas of stress ~

1. The psychology of stress,
2. General workplace stressors associated with employment,
3. Burnout in the human services field.

❑ There are *internal* and *external* characteristics of tedium.

Internal: Variety, autonomy, significance, success, feedback.

External: Work relations, work sharing, support, time out, and social feedback.

Findings from this work informed the future of burnout studies. It established that burnout is predictable and measurable.



Maslach Burnout Inventory

- Based on the original Pines & Maslach and others works, Maslach developed the “Maslach Burnout Inventory” which measures burnout. Initially, the instrument measured 47 questions pertaining to “burnout.”
- Over time, Maslach and colleagues refined the instrument. Today, the MBI (3rd Ed) (1996) includes 22 questions measuring burnout on three subscales:
 - ✓ *Emotional Exhaustion (EE)*
 - ✓ *Depersonalization (Dp)*
 - ✓ *Personal Accomplishment (PA)*



Known Differences Between Groups

- Several studies on burnout have been conducted since the mid-1970's, with varying findings.

Supervisor and line-level social worker differences.

- Erera & Haifa (1991) found that compared to line-work employees, supervisors experience higher levels of depersonalization and lower levels of personal accomplishment. Reasons: Role conflict, ambiguous organizational policies and expectations. Increased social support was found to have a moderating effect on role conflict and ambiguity.



Known Differences Between Groups

Male & female differences.

- No significant differences were found between groups by Himle (1986).
- No significant differences were found between groups by Mackie (2005).
- LeCroy & Rank (1986) did find differences between genders. Males scored significantly lower than females on the *EE* scale (but not *Dp* or *PA*).

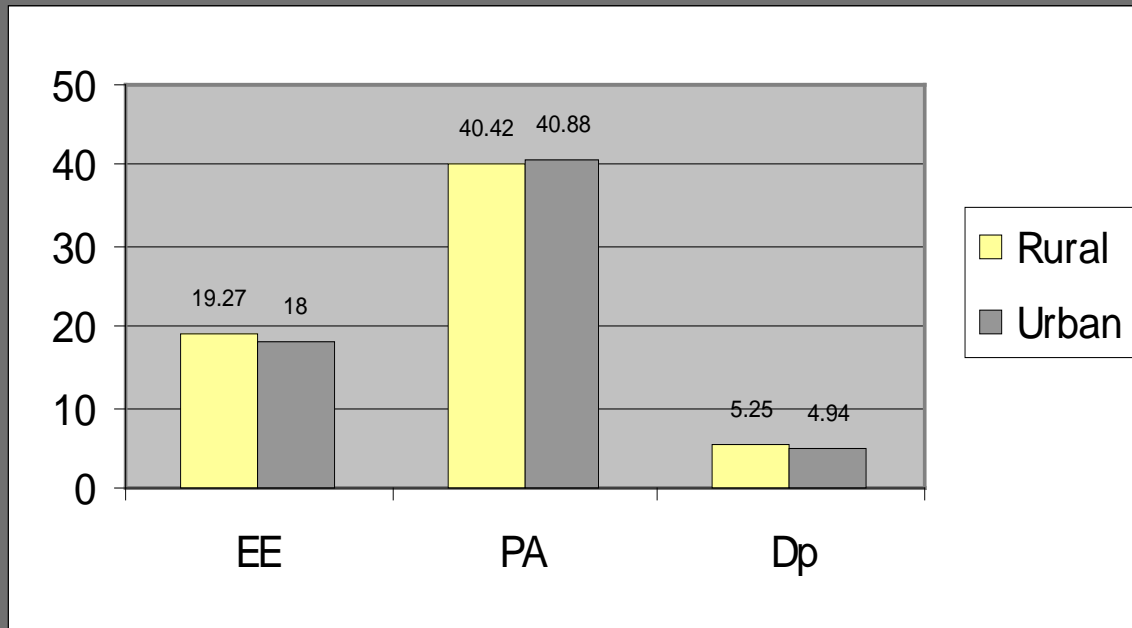
Clearly, there is a lack of agreement between groups.



Known Differences Between Groups

Rural and urban location differences.

- Mackie (2005) found no statistical differences between rural and urban social workers and worker levels of burnout.



But are social workers really “Burned Out?”

- While there is evidence that burnout among social workers exists, are they as a group really all that burned out?
- Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg (1995) reviewed the state of social work burnout literature (18 empirical articles located) and found little evidence that social workers actually display high or even moderate rates of burnout.
 - Many of the studies were not cross-comparable. Some were found to have questionable methodologies, some did not use same standardized instruments.
 - Among those that could be compared, little evidence of “burnout” was found.



But are social workers really “Burned Out?”

- Supporting the Soderfeldt et al analysis of existing research, Mackie (2005) found similar results – social workers as a group are not as **crispy** as we tend to anecdotally believe.

Brief overview of Mackie (2005) study:

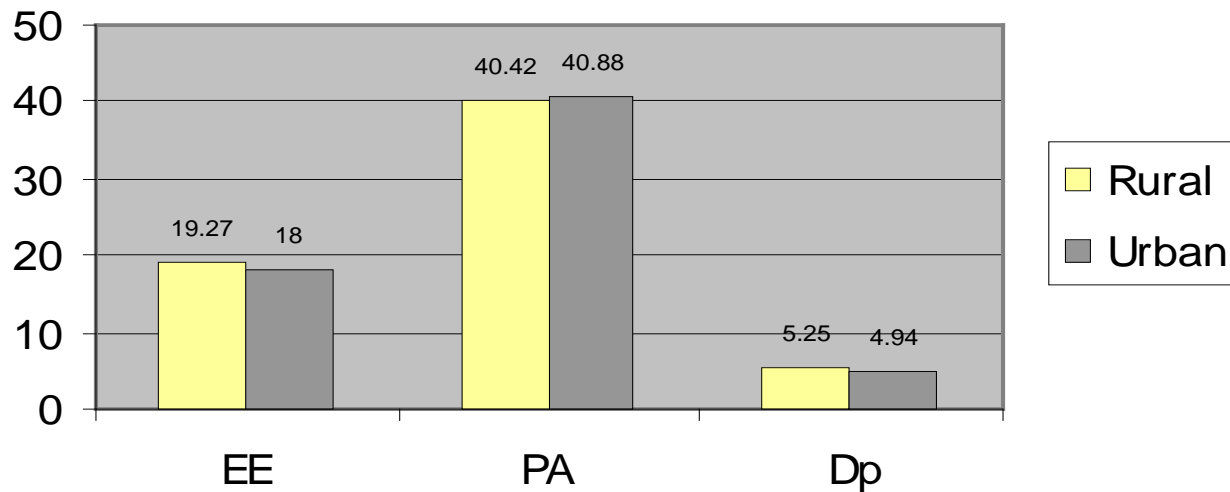
- Sampled 1,665 NASW social workers across 8 predominantly rural states (AK, ME, MN, MS, MT, SD, WV, WY). Surveys returned = 876 (53%).
- Demographics: White = 88.5%, female = 78%, Highest degree MSW (81%). Total years as social worker: $M = 16.4$. Total hours worked per week: $M = 39.6$.
- Administered the MBI to measure levels of burnout.
- Considered differences of burnout between rural & urban-based practitioners.



Interpreting the Data

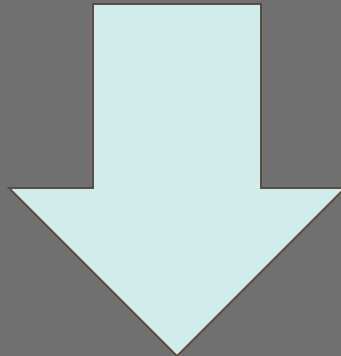
Findings from Mackie (2005) study

EE	PA	Dp
High = 27 or over	High = 0 – 31	High = 13 or over
Mod = 17 – 26	Mod = 32 – 38	Mod = 7 -12
Low = 0 – 16	Low = 39 or over	Low = 0 - 6



Does This Mean there is no Burnout among Social Workers?

- Of course not. I found ample evidence of burnout among my sample at the individual level. So have others.
- These data only suggest that *overall* burnout is not as prevalent as we might think.
- Several factors associated with burnout were identified by Soderfeldt et al (1995).



General Factors Associated with Burnout

Work related factors

- Low work autonomy
- Lack of job challenge
- Lack of professional support
- Role ambiguity
- Low professional self-esteem
- Low pay
- High degree of work pressure
- Poor agency functioning
- Working in the public sector

(Adapted from: Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995)



General Factors Associated with Burnout

Client related factors

- Negative impressions of clients
- Personal involvement in clients' problems
- Over involvement in client-worker relationship

Worker/personal related factors

- Chronic minor hassles of daily living
- Family income
- Attitudes toward the profession
- Years of experience
- Lower education levels

(Adapted from: Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995)



Factors Associated with MBI Subscales

Emotional Exhaustion (EE)

- Role conflict
- Boredom
- Lack of challenges at work
- Intent to change job
- Low job satisfaction
- Working 31 – 40 hours per week with clients with chronic illnesses (excludes clients with cystic fibrosis)

(Adapted from: Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995)



Factors Associated with MBI Subscales

Depersonalization (*Dp*)

- Value conflict
- Higher education
- Worker younger in age
- Amount of client contacts (for male social workers only)
- Lack of supervisory support
- Working 31 – 40 hours per week with clients with chronic illnesses (excludes clients with cystic fibrosis)

(Adapted from: Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995)



Factors Associated with MBI Subscales

Personal Accomplishment (*PA*)

- Role ambiguity
- Poor working conditions
- Unfair promotional policies
- Increased contact with clients (females only – *PA* increases with increased contact among males)
- No perceived team support
- Working in public sector
- Type “A” personality

(Adapted from: Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995)



Where do we go from here?

- Is there burnout among social workers? **YES** – while not as prevalent as we sometimes think, it does exist.
- Should we be concerned? **OF COURSE**. Burnout and the dissatisfaction that comes with it cost us practitioners. This is especially problematic in rural areas where we currently lack adequate staffing among social workers.
- We as social workers should also be concerned from a humanistic perspective – we take care of ourselves and each other so that we can help care for others.



What can we do?

There are several strategies we can employ to address burnout among social workers...

- Improve staff communications
- Encourage participatory leadership within the agency
- Provide adequate supervision, especially for younger social workers
- Increase job security
- Provide adequate training for line workers
- Provide adequate training for supervisors
- Provide clear job expectations, define work objectives clearly
- Rotate difficult or unfavorable work assignments
- Recognize need for independence, professional self-esteem



Reviewing Burnout Assessment Instruments

- The MBI is a copyrighted instrument and quite pricey (about \$1.00 each) ~ therefore, we will review it on the overhead projector.
- Other Burnout assessments:

- Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI)
- Burnout Self-Test:

[http://www.mindtools.com/stress/Brn/BurnoutSelfTest.htm#
Table](http://www.mindtools.com/stress/Brn/BurnoutSelfTest.htm#Table)

- Burnout Test (service fields):

[http://www.queendom.com/tests/access_page/index.htm?id
RegTest=677](http://www.queendom.com/tests/access_page/index.htm?idRegTest=677)

- The Fried Social Worker:

<http://www.friedsocialworker.com> (contains free burnout assessments)



Conclusion

- While burnout among social workers is not as prevalent as we often anecdotally believe, it does exist.
- Burnout is measureable, predictable, and when identified, its negative effects can be reversed.
- Using the instruments described and information provided, we can address problems associated with burnout among social workers, and work toward creating/maintaining a healthier, more productive, and more stable workforce.

