

## FORENSIC SOCIAL WORKERS' SELF-CARE

<sup>a</sup>MIRIAMA ŠARIŠSKÁ, <sup>b</sup>BEÁTA BALOGOVÁ

*Institute of Educology and Social Work, Faculty of Arts,  
University of Prešov, Ul. 17. novembra No. 1, 080 01 Prešov,  
Slovakia*

*Email:<sup>a</sup>miriama.sarisska1@gmail.com*

*<sup>b</sup>beata.balogova@unipo.sk*

This paper is an outcome of the project Gapu 05/2020 Forensic social workers' self-care.

**Abstract:** The paper presents the results of semi-structured open question interviews with forensic social workers. Respondents are on-site social workers and social workers working in an international non-profit organization. The selection of respondents was intentional, based on a social workers' job position and their direct encounter with forensic clients, while their participation in the research was voluntary. The interviewing focused on social workers' self-care and resilience interdependence. Resilience has been the focal point of social work scholars' interest for several years. As a person's ability to effectively manage inappropriate life situations (Sabolová Fabianová and Žiaková 2016) and being present in physiological, psychological and spiritual areas, it is also point of attention for scholars from the Institute of Life-long Education and Social Work (Faculty of Arts, Prešov University). The main research question is as follows: In what ways do you cope with the burden of your work and what techniques do you use to support your own resilience?

**Keywords:** social workers' self-care, mental well-being, self-care techniques, burnout syndrome, prevention.

### 1 The importance of self-care and resilience development

Self-care is an important concept for social workers, supporting the effectiveness of their work performance, as well as their subjective well-being. This opinion is also supported by Petriková, Lichner and Žiaková (2019), who deal with the second form of social workers' self-care as a set of specific activities aimed at self-care and at eliminating inappropriate behavior. Petriková, Lichner and Žiaková (2019) refer to research carried out by several domestic or foreign scholars, which proves the scientific interest in the issue under discussion. Self-care is generally defined as "a process of purposeful involvement in strategies aimed at supporting healthful agency and increasing well-being" [author's translation] (Dorociak, Rupert, Bryant, and Zahniser 2017, p. 326, in: Miller, Poklembová, Podkovińska, Grise-Owens, Balogová, and Pachner 2019; Miller, Poklembová, Grise-Owens and Bowman 2020). Self-care can be perceived as a tool for the development of mental well-being, but also as a tool for supporting health, mental hygiene or overall personal development of a person within their individual psychology (Lovaš 2014; Balogová, Miller and Poklembová 2017, in: Knurovský and Balogová 2018). It follows that the ability of social workers to engage in self-care also affects the performance when working with the clients. Ensuring and maintaining self-care in all its factors, including mental, physical, social and spiritual factors (Petriková, Lichner and Žiaková 2019), has a great impact on all areas of the social worker's life. Regarding the self-care factors taxonomy, Willins and Ratliff (2019) also include the emotional factor in the system. In a narrower definition, the authors list the factors primarily linked to the helping professions, namely "good social climate, work-related pitfalls management, social worker's professional life and professional growth in terms of better work-related stress management, mental and physical health" [author's translation] (Mesárošová 2018; Lovaš 2014; Lichner 2018; Čerešník, Gatial 2014, in: Petriková, Lichner and Žiaková 2019, p. 225).

Within self-care aimed at achieving efficiency, stability or balance in the social worker's personal and professional life, resilience is an effective aspect that can significantly influence social worker's agency. Resilience leads to success at work, but also in other areas of life, while significantly supporting successful management of extremely stressful situations. As Mahdi and Khoshaba (2005) argue, it transforms disruptive stress-situations-related changes or conflicts into opportunities for growth. They add that resilience is not just an innate ability, but can be acquired and improved through learning and training.

Mahdi and Koshaba (2005) confirm that the resilience development currently depends on the existence of personal internal resilience sources for stress management. With regard to the issue of social workers' resilience, Sabolová Fabianová (2017) offers a pragmatic dimension of its presence and development importance. She considers resilience to be an important aspect in social worker's life because of the emotional and psychological demands of their work stemming from the clients' individual experience and affecting social worker's own experience. In addition, she considers resilience to be a protective factor helping to overcome mental, emotional or other stressful situations, whether on the part of clients or social workers, and thus assisting social workers in enhancing their ability to work successfully with the client. Generally, resilience can be defined as "an ability which, on the one hand, can be helpful in adapting to a stressful situation thanks to its dynamics; on the other hand, dynamics itself exercises influence on resilience as an ability. Dynamics – flexibility – allows us to work with the resilience in order to increase the functionality of its protective potential" [author's translation] (Poklembová and Sabolová Fabianová 2018, p. 120). Skodol (2010) offers a taxonomy of the following personality skills, whose building and strengthening contribute to high resilience:

- self-esteem,
- self-confidence,
- self-knowledge,
- positive future orientation,
- negative behavior and emotions self-control,
- ego resiliency,
- defense mechanisms.

### 2 Social workers' self-care

Forensic social work as a semi-profession is primarily focused on dealing with clients being in conflict with social or legal norms. In addition, it includes dealing with clients with demonstrably disruptive behaviors referred to as anti-social, deviant, aggressive or criminal (Šarišská and Balogová 2019a; Maschi, Leibowitz and Killian 2018, Schmidt and Hennessey 2019; Wyležalek and Podkovińska 2018). In Slovakia, forensic areas are differentiated originally from the point of view of the clientele, as well as from the point of view of social interventions or social problems to be tackled by social workers. Forensic social work deals also with the issues of social protection for children, social guardianship, criminal activities, legal services and mental health (Šarišská and Balogová 2019a; Šarišská 2017). Forensic social workers' self-care is a necessary factor in the work performance, which often includes an analysis of their clients' burdensome life situations in the most vulnerable segments of society (Willins and Ratliff 2019; Hamadej 2016; Jašková and Sabolová Fabianová 2019). An important step in self-care is, first and foremost, the awareness and recognition of stress and changes signals in social worker's life. With regard to the forensic social workers' resilience, the scholars highlight stress as the main cause of the disruption of social workers' agency in professional and personal life. And consequently, as a way of stress reduction and mental health improvement, could social workers' self-care follow (Poklembová 2019). Stress causes identification is one of the key activities in this profession. The following indicators are considered to be basic stress indicators in the forensic social worker semi-profession (NASW 2018, in: Willins and Ratliff 2019, p. 145):

- secondary traumatic stress – the presence of post-traumatic symptoms of a stress disorder resulting from indirect exposure to a traumatic situation,
- compassion fatigue – a term used interchangeably with secondary traumatic stress and burnout,
- burnout – emotional exhaustion and feelings of inefficiency due to work stress,
- mediated trauma – a change in internal experience due to an empathic relationship with a traumatized person,

- compassion satisfaction – positive feelings arising from the competent performance of a traumatized worker characterized by positive relationships with colleagues and the belief that their work is significantly beneficial.

With regard to forensic social workers' self-care, it is also necessary to list its individual methods.

Tab. 1.: Self-care methods

AREA	METHODS
<i>Physical self-care</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- healthy diet,</li> <li>- physical exercise,</li> <li>- regular medical check-up,</li> <li>- illness-related rest,</li> <li>- massages,</li> <li>- leisure-time activities, e.g. dancing, swimming, going for a walk, running, doing sports, singing</li> <li>- sufficient amount of sleep</li> <li>- wearing favorite clothes,</li> <li>- going for holidays, trip,</li> <li>- restraining from using phone / computer (including personal phone calls), etc.</li> </ul>
<i>Mental self-care</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taking time for self-reflection,</li> <li>- psychotherapy,</li> <li>- diary writing,</li> <li>- reading</li> <li>- carrying out new activities without taking a leading position,</li> <li>- inner experience (thoughts, prejudices, feelings, trust, abilities) recording,</li> <li>- life-long learning,</li> <li>- exercising the ability to be accepted by others,</li> <li>- training in refusing increased responsibilities at work,</li> <li>- practicing the skill to ask for help when needed, etc.</li> </ul>
<i>Emotional self-care</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- spending time with friends,</li> <li>- being in touch with people who matter,</li> <li>- exercising the ability of self-confirmation,</li> <li>- searching for the ways to increase self-esteem,</li> <li>- re-reading favorite books</li> <li>- analyzing popular films,</li> <li>- reaching out for pleasant activities, objects, people, relationships, places,</li> <li>- achieving relief through crying, if necessary,</li> <li>- searching for and being in touch with things that make one laugh,</li> <li>- practicing skill to express prejudices or disagreements in social events, letters, collections, protests,</li> <li>- playing with children, animals, gardening, etc.</li> </ul>
<i>Spiritual self-care</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- taking time for contemplation,</li> <li>- spending time doing outdoor activities,</li> <li>- seeking spiritual connection in the community,</li> <li>- being open to inspiration,</li> <li>- being sensitive towards the intangible aspects of life,</li> <li>- avoiding exercising power and being an expert at all times,</li> <li>- recognizing things that matter and their importance,</li> <li>- performing meditation,</li> <li>- saying prayer,</li> <li>- singing, etc.</li> </ul>

Source: Bensinger, DuPont; Cox and Steiner (2013, in: Willins and Ratliff 2019, pp. 148-150)

The listed self-care methods operate as priority variables within the qualitative research methodology.

### 3 Research methodology

Within research on social workers' self-care, primarily quantitative research is carried out through a wide range of research tools. Quantitative research studies into self-care and resilience have yielded interesting results, however, qualitative research is of major importance. The choice of a qualitative research strategy reflects the nature and importance of qualitative research in the social sciences. Qualitative research, we dare venture, yields findings that are highly specific, clear, detailed and reflecting the researched area in a fully tangible sense. The research problem in this case is the self-care of social workers dealing with forensic clients. The research problem formulation draws on the theory of forensic social work currently growing in Slovakia, and on the need to define its further particularities. The present research also builds on the existing aforementioned quantitative research. The main goal of qualitative research is to find out what self-care forms are used by social workers dealing with forensic clients in various institutions. The main research question is as follows: In what ways do you cope with the burden of your work and what techniques do you use to support your own resilience? Based on conceptualization and operationalization, the data from the following areas was analyzed:

- forensic clients (Šarišská and Balogová 2019),
- self-care methods (Willins and Ratliff 2019).

Within the present research, specific research topics were identified based on the previously analyzed data so that we could objectively identify relevant information and posit research questions targeted at the respondents. The identified research topics also serve for a more detailed analysis of the written interview records.

Tab. 2.: Research topics

<i>Research topics</i>	
<b>RT 1</b>	<i>The type of clients' challenging behaviors encountered by social workers.</i>
<b>RT 2</b>	<i>The work-related issues affecting bio-psycho-socio-spiritual component of social workers' personality.</i>
<b>RT 3</b>	<i>The time consumption on social workers' self-care-related activities.</i>
<b>RT 4</b>	<i>Social workers' physical self-care methods.</i>
<b>RT 5</b>	<i>Social workers' psychological self-care methods.</i>
<b>RT 6</b>	<i>Social workers' emotional self-care methods.</i>
<b>RT 7</b>	<i>Social workers' spiritual self-care methods.</i>

Source: present research data

The research methodology was derived from the set objective, research questions and the variables operationalized as being primary for formulating the interview questions. The respondents were selected through deliberate sampling. Based on our long-term cooperation the respondents were addressed directly and their participation was voluntary. The group consisted of four social workers employed by various institutions providing social services, and directly involved in social work with forensic clients. The selected research tool was a semi-structured interview comprising open-ended questions. We opted for this particular research tool since "a semi-structured interview is popular for its flexibility, accessibility, and comprehensibility, as well as for its feature to prove, reveal important and often hidden and serious aspects of human and organizational behaviors. It is frequently the most effective and advantageous means of obtaining data" [author's translation], (Mišovič 2019, p. 80) "a semi-structured interview contains prepared questions, consistently and systematically aiming at identification of research topics through earlier received responds. The most important part of it is the core conversation, a pattern obligatory for the researcher. ... The core interview is followed by further supplementary topics and questions which appropriately elaborate on the original aim" [author's translation], (Miovský 2009, p. 160, in: Mišovič 2019, p. 80).

The core questions of the interview included the following ones:

- During your work, do you ever encounter situations that negatively affect your work commitment?
- During your work, have you noticed how difficult situations arose and how has this affected your experience?
- Do you engage in self-care?
- What self-care methods do you consider most effective for you?
- What self-care methods do you use to successfully manage the work-related stress?

The core conversation consists of research questions following the main research objective, i.e. social workers' self-care specific forms, techniques or methods. Non-obligatory questions primarily concerned a closer identification of the negative or stressful situations experienced by workers.

The validity of the research was ensured by consulting the procedures applied with other experts not involved in the research. These were social work scholars who conducted mostly quantitative research on social workers' self-care. Subsequently, the validity was supported by a third component – the theoretical underpinnings of social workers' self-care. In qualitative research, reliability is ensured by applying unchanged conditions for conducting the interviews and data processing with regard to all respondents.

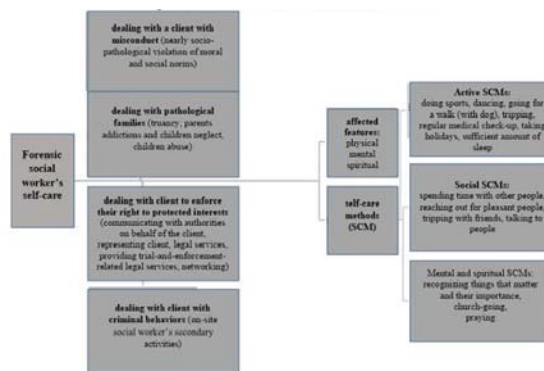
#### 4 Results of qualitative research

Respondents' statements suggest that each of them engages in self-care. Respondents dealing with forensic clients elucidate that this is an area of social work that is extremely demanding and affects their experience as may be illustrated by the following responses: "Work affects my performance and especially its biological and mental aspect. Yes, while doing my job, I encountered challenging situations that affected my experience. I realized that I could handle them better" (R 5). "It is my mental life that is mainly affected. Stressful situations and solving complex problems affect my experience. The thing is that my clients share their problems with me and I transfer this experience to my private life." (R1).

The present research reveals that respondents engage in self-care through numerous self-care methods and activities requiring an active involvement (e.g. walking, exercising, dancing and entertainment), and, at the same time, being in touch with other people. Another most frequently stated activity was reading books or watching movies. We also inquired social workers about the impact of work performance on specific personality features (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual). All four respondents indicated the spiritual aspect, which is surprising. They stated that spirituality helps them manage the impact of their work with forensic clients upon their private lives. Prayer, church-going and worship were stated as basic self-care spiritual methods, as may be illustrated by the following statements. "I deal with spiritual issues and they are important in my life. As I said, prayer and going to church are personally important for me. Regular attendance to worship helps me purify myself mentally and to gain mental well-being for the time to come" (R5).

In summary, we can present the results of the present research in the following diagram, which reflects social workers' self-care when dealing with forensic clients. The interview identified data most often mentioned with regard to forensic client behavior (type definition), the feature that is most affected by work and the most frequently used self-care methods.

Diagram 1.: Self-care of forensic social worker



Source: present research data

From the above diagram, it is possible to infer that the emotional feature was not indicated in the interview; the respondents did not comment on it in any way. Not all respondents gave identical answers to the questions concerning the impact of work performance and workload on their emotional well-being, and therefore the results are not included in the diagram. However, three respondents stated that their emotional well-being was influenced and stated that they could achieve it through the following activities: walking, reading a book, listening to pleasurable music, chatting with colleagues, through active listening and seeking support. The emotional self-care feature can also be achieved in a systemic way, as stated by one of the respondents. "Through analyzing my emotions. I will consider what they are and to what extent they are dangerous or annoying to me. I sort out these thoughts somehow and work with them accordingly. This way, I can more easily rationalize them, understand them, and then act normally in my work or in my private life. For example, when I'm angry, I need to get into mental well-being, e.g. through listening to music or working with children, whether doing some tutoring or engaging in a joint activity" (R4). Disruption of the emotional well-being was also perceived in a reverse direction from personal to professional life. "If various problems or situations arise in my personal life, they will affect my performance at work in a certain way. At the same time, my work can be like relief. One can devote oneself to one's work for a while and does not always have to think about one's personal problems. However, one must be able to guard and balance it well" (R3).

#### 5 Conclusion

We can state that social workers dealing with forensic clients engage in self-care activities. Qualitative research unveils that self-care is a highly up-to-date issue dealt with by social workers and social work scholarly studies. Based on the interview analysis, we can also conclude that social workers are well aware of the importance of self-care and of the challenge of dealing with forensic clients. Social workers recognized activities helping them to manage work-related stress. They also described in much detail what challenges they face in various aspects of their personal lives and professional career, recognizing a challenging and demanding nature of this semi-profession. Therefore, we can emphasize the need for founding other institutions and agencies, (e.g. supervision that can affect the forensic social workers' work-related stress management).

#### Literature:

1. Balogová, B.: Challenges and Limits in Forensic Social Work in Slovakia. In: Labor Socialis: Social Work in Changing Europe in the 21st Century: Proceedings of Scientific Conference with International Participation, held at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra on September 21, 2016. Nitra: Faculty of Social Sciences and Health, 2016. pp. 12-14. ISBN 978-80-558-1134-5.

2. Balogová, B.: Spreads of Forensic Social Work in Theory and Practice. In: Levická, K., Patayi, P., eds. *Res socialis: social work in changing Europe* social work in changing Europe. Trnava: Department of Social Work, Faculty of Health and Social Work, Trnava University in Trnava, 2017. pp. 81-86. ISBN 978-80-568-0060-7.
3. Balogová, B.: The ethical dimension of the quality of life of convicts through the lens of forensic social work. In: Kačmárová, M., ed. *Quality of life. Interdisciplinarity as a wealth of knowledge based on diversity*. Prešov: University of Prešov in Prešov, 2020. pp. 59 – 65. ISBN 978-80-555-2404-7.
4. Hamadej, M.: Challenges for sociotherapy in social work. In: Ološtiak, M., ed. 11. Student scientific and artistic conference: Faculty of Arts of the University of Prešov in Prešov, held under the auspices of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Prešov in Prešov, prof. PhDr. Vasil Gluchman, CSc., On April 29, 2015. Prešov: University of Prešov in Prešov, 2016. pp. 410-415. ISBN 978-80-555-1609-7.
5. Hendl, J. *Qualitative research. Basic theories, methods and applications*. Prague: Portal, 2016. ISBN 978-80-262-0982-9.
6. Jašková, A., Sabolová Fabianová, A. The importance of resilience of helping workers in hypermodernity. In: Šiňanská, K., Tóthová, L. *Social work without prejudices*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo RESPECT, 2019. pp. 84-88. ISBN 978-83-950824-1-2.
7. Knurovský, M., BALOGOVÁ, B. Selfcare – self-care with an emphasis on mindfulness in seniors. In: *Journal sociotherapie*. 4 (3). 2018. pp. 75 – 80. ISSN 2453 - 7543.
8. Maschi, T., Leibowitz, G. S., Killian, L. M. Conceptual and Historical Overview of Forensic Social Work. In: Maschi, T., Leibowitz, G. S., eds. *Forensic Social Work. Psychosocial and Legal Issues Across Diverse Populations and Settings*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2018. pp. 3 – 30. ISBN 978-0-8261-2066-3.
9. Miller, J. J., Poklembová, Z., Grise-Owens, E., Bowman, A. Exploring the self-care practice of social workers in Slovakia: How do they fare? In: *International Social Work*. 63 (1). 2020. pp. 30-41. ISSN 0020-8728.
10. Mišovič, J. *Qualitative research focusing on a semi-structured interview*. Prague: Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON), 2019. ISBN 978-80-7419-285-2.
11. Petriková, F., Lichner, L., Žiaková, E. Self-care with regard to adolescents' risky behavior. In: Fedoročko, P., ed. *Collection of papers from 6th Spring Internationalized Doctoral School*. UPJŠ 2019. Košice: UPJŠ, 2019. pp. 224-228. ISBN 978-80-8152-741-8.
12. Poklembová, Z., Sabolová Fabianová, A. Changes in resilience, in school assignment management strategies and in attentiveness in university students – presentation of a pilot study. In: Balogová, B., SKYBA, M., eds. *Current challenges for social work – Proceedings of an international conference*. Prešov: University of Prešov in Prešov, 2018. pp. 118 – 131. ISBN 978-80-555-2076-6.
13. Poklembová, Z. 2019. Possibilities of using mindfulness in helping professions. In: Šiňanská, K., Tóthová, L. *Social work without prejudices*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo RESPECT, 2019. pp. 64-66. ISBN 978-83-950824-1-2.
14. Sabolová Fabianová, A., ŽIAKOVÁ, T. Sociotherapy as a therapeutic concept applied in increasing cancer clients' resilience. In: *Journal sociotherapie*. 2 (1-2). 2016. pp. 32 – 34. ISSN 2453-7543.
15. Sabolová Fabianová, A. Resilience in social science research. In: Balogová, B., POKLEMBOVÁ, Z., eds. *Approaches to and means of exploration in social science research*. Proceedings of 7th doctoral conference held on November 24, 2016 in Prešov. Prešov: University of Prešov in Prešov, 2017. pp. 139 – 142. ISBN 978-80-555-1809-1.
16. Schmidt, C., Hennessey, M. Cultural Humility and Special Populations. In: Ratliff, A. WILLINS, M., eds. *Criminal defense-based forensic social work*. New York: Routledge, 2019. pp. 78 – 94. ISBN 978-1-138-22154-3.
17. Šarišská, M., BALOGOVÁ, B. A look at specific issues of semiprofessional forensic social work. In: *Social Service Review*. 10 (1). 2018. pp. 26 -33. ISSN 1338-1075.
18. Šarišská, M., BALOGOVÁ, B. Forensic social work – theoretical and practical backgrounds. Prešov: University of Prešov Publishing House, 2019a. ISBN 978-80-555-2189-3.
19. Šarišská, M., BALOGOVÁ, B. A case study of exploring a juvenile client's criminal behavior. In: *Journal sociotherapie*. 5, (1). 2019b. pp. 57 – 65. ISSN 2453 - 7543.
20. Šarišská, M. Forensic social work as a part of social guardianship. In: Ološtiak, M., MARCHEVSKY, O., eds. *Proceedings of 14th student research and art production conference*. Prešov: University of Prešov, 2017. pp. 264 – 270. ISBN 978-80-555-2236-4.
21. Šarišská, M., BALOGOVÁ, B., HAMADEJ, M. Sociotherapeutic dimension of forensic social work. In: MMK 2019: Peer-reviewed Proceedings of the International Conference: International Masaryk Conference for Doctoral Students and Young Researchers 2019. Hradec Králové: Magnanimitas academic association, 2019. pp. 697 – 705. ISBN 978-80-87952-31-3.
22. Šarišská, M., BALOGOVÁ, B., HAMADEJ, M. Normative analysis of social intervention provided for accused, convicted and released clients with special emphasis on their quality of life. In: Kačmarová, M., ed. *Quality of life 2019: interdisciplinarity as a wealth of knowledge based on diversity*. Prešov: University of Prešov in Prešov, 2020. pp. 388 – 399. ISBN 978-80-555-2404-7.
23. Willins, M., RATLIFF, A. Self-Care. In: Ratliff, A., WILLINS, M., eds. *Criminal defense-based forensic social work*. New York: Routledge, 2019. pp. 144 – 152. ISBN 978-1-138-22154-3.
24. Maddi, R. S., KHOSHABA, D. M. *Resilience at work: how to succeed no matter what life throws at you*. NY: Amacom, 2005. ISBN 0-8144-7260-5.
25. Skodol, E. A. *The Resilient Personality*. In: Reich, J. W., Zautra, A. J., Hall, J. S., eds. *Handbook of Adult Resilience*. NY, London: The Guilford Press, 2010. pp. 112 – 125. ISBN 978-1-60623-488-4.
26. Wyležatek, J., PODKOWIŃSKA, M. Pathological mechanisms of human resources management. In: PODKOWIŃSKA, M., ed. *Communication Education Culture*. Prešov: University of Prešov in Prešov, 2018. pp. 83 – 101. ISBN 978-80-555-2024-7.

**Primary Paper Section: A**

**Secondary Paper Section: AM, AN, AO**