

Social Work Students, Placements and Mental Health

How does undertaking a placement impact on a social work student's emotional wellbeing?

SURVEY BACKGROUND AND PARTICIPANTS

This survey was distributed to approximately 120 Social Work students from all years, both undergraduate and postgraduate students undertaking their studies at the University of Strathclyde.

Upon closing after two weeks, the survey had garnered 42 responses from students - 8 postgraduate and 34 undergraduate, with 88% of these having already undertaken or currently a placement.

Students were asked to answer honestly about their experiences of placement and their experiences of mental health in order to assist with the training of new practice teachers in placement settings.

This was a completely anonymous survey and students were supplied with methods of contacting support services upon completion.

MENTAL HEALTH

Over 78% of the students who responded felt that they had experienced a mental health condition (whether diagnosed or undiagnosed), with general/social anxiety (69%) and depression (52.4%) being the most reported.

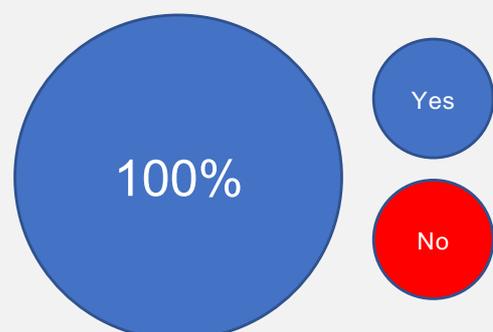
IMPACT OF PLACEMENT

Of the 38 of those who had or currently were undertaking placement, 92% experienced challenging emotional experiences during this time, such as nervousness (71.1%), self-esteem/ confidence issues (68.4%), anxiety (68.4%) and loneliness (31.6%)

These findings were strikingly similar to the responses of those who had yet to undertake a social work placement when asked if they thought that they may experience any of these challenging emotional experiences when undertaking a placement in future.

Do you feel that it is important to you that future practice teachers possess an awareness of possible mental health issues experiences by social work students?

42 responses



What do students say?

Was / is there anything in particular that triggered / could trigger these challenging emotional experiences during placement?

"Past anxieties in relation to meeting and building rapport with new people"

"Financial difficulties / worries"; "I still had to earn money to pay my mortgage and bills"

"Having no experience"; "Nerves about the unknown"

"Being unprepared for meetings involving other professionals"

"Making mistakes"

"Fear of being on a less useful placement than peers"

"Feeling I was not good enough at the job"; "Worrying if people thought I wouldn't make a good social worker"; "Fear of failure"

"The stress of trying to work part time, study and undertake a practice placement"

"Feeling like you were constantly being observed and not just on a professional level but a personal level"

"High work load"; "Feeling overwhelmed"

"Worrying about if I was saying the correct thing to families and if I wasn't, how would this backlash on me"

Unhelpful experiences

"[Practice teacher] spoke behind my back with link worker about me instead of speaking to me directly, which made things worse"

"My practice teacher had concerns which were harshly conveyed to me which added to low self-esteem" worse"

"Lack of compassion/empathy"; "If you can't manage it now, how are you going to manage it in social work?"; "At a time where I was feeling very exhausted and got upset during a supervision, the PT dismissed this and made me feel embarrassed, suggesting I wasn't up to the pressures of the job"

"My practice teacher didn't know me at all and regularly forgot things I'd told them about myself."

What do students say?

Helpful experiences / tips for new practice teachers

"Was very welcoming, brought me tea and introduced me to rest of team"

"My PT made sure I took my study days and that I had time on placement to do relevant reading of policy and theory related to my casework"

"Supervision helped a lot"

"My practice teacher does not make me feel like I am annoying her with my questions"

"To remember what it was like being a student and to not expect us to know everything"

"Gave reassurance and advice"

"I think my practice teacher picked up on the fact I never had much confidence and she tried to work on that with me"

"Spoke me through what was expected of me, talked me through what I did after (debrief)"

"Support students to be honest about their worries, anxieties and mental health concerns early on, and allow them to feel they can share by looking at specific ways to cope with them throughout placement"

"Don't underestimate the power of just asking someone how they are. But also meaning it when you ask them. And being able to listen and provide a space for honesty and support"

"My PT has been very helpful. she has allowed me time to vent, offered time off placement and checked in with me regularly. She also minimised my work load as much as I wanted it to be"

"Discussed my strengths and areas for development, as we agreed to try and address the things I was nervous about as one of our goals"

"Positive reinforcement and praise made such a difference to my confidence"

"Share their own experiences";
"Speak of their fears/similar feelings";
"Normalise the experience of feeling uneasy / anxious"