



Ms Gracia Goh, group lead for the Children in Care Group at the Singapore Children's Society, has worked in the social service sector for more than 15 years. There have been times when she has been "too drawn into the emotional experience" of her clients, but what has kept her going is support from her supervisor and other social workers. PHOTO: SINGAPORE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY

Social workers need help too as cases drain them emotionally

Better preparation also necessary for today's more complex cases

Syarafana Shafeeq

After watching a movie about a social worker trying to save a young girl from her abusive parents, 14-year-old Siti Nur Diyanah Hardy vowed to become someone who would one day help children facing difficulties.

She made good on her promise. Ms Diyanah is today a child safety officer at the Rainbow Centre, a social service organisation she joined in 2021.

The 31-year-old was the first Malay student to graduate from the National University of Singapore (NUS) with first class honours in social work in 2015.

Passion fuelled her when she started working upon graduation. Soon, the challenges of the work – round-the-clock interactions with those in need, and the difficult problems her clients faced – proved overwhelming.

Six months into her job, Ms Diyanah found herself experiencing burnout.

She said: "I woke up and I did not want to get out of bed. When I was home, I hardly spoke to my family and just stayed in my room as I felt very tired."

"I realised I was burned out when I was about to have a session with one of my clients and felt like I didn't want to go, which had never happened before. I'm usually always happy to see them, so when I realised my heart was not in it, I knew it was a problem."

She spoke to her supervisor about getting support and took a break before returning to work.

Her heart remains in social work and she said: "I feel very passionately and strongly about children and their right to be safe. That keeps me going."

Tuesday is World Social Work Day, which recognises the achievements of social workers and seeks to raise the visibility of social services in society.

In a speech in 2022, President Halimah Yacob highlighted how social workers are at the heart of the community. With Singapore facing a rapidly ageing population and slowing social mobility, she said social workers will continue to play an important role to uplift individuals and families in need.



Ms Siti Nur Diyanah Hardy from the Rainbow Centre suffered burnout six months into her job and took a break before returning to work. ST PHOTO: RYAN CHIONG

Ms Tan Sze Wee, president of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW), told *The Straits Times* in an interview last week that burnout is a pressing issue.

She said: "We work with people. I think when you work with people, there's a lot of giving of yourself. I would say that the aspects of our work and the nature of it then present us with a higher risk of burnout if we do not take care of ourselves."

She noted that educating and preparing social workers for the roles they will play have been given greater priority because of the high risk of burnout.

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PRESIDENT OF THE SINGAPORE ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS TAN SZE WEE

have to care for yourselves first."

Associate Professor Lee Geok Ling, head of the Department of Social Work at NUS, said an important quality social workers have is empathy. This can be a double-edged sword, as one can become emotionally drained.

Prof Lee added that social workers today handle tougher cases, as the challenges faced by clients may be more complex.

Agreeing, SASW's Ms Tan said: "I think the complexities of a person's problems have increased and so as social workers, whatever setting that you're in, you really need to arm yourself with a lot of knowledge."

Ms Gracia Goh, group lead for the Children in Care Group at Singapore Children's Society, can identify with this.

She said: "When I get too drawn into the emotional experience of my client or even my supervisee, I may get caught up in feeling equally helpless, pained or anxious. This happens because the gateway to helping is attentive listening."

Ms Goh, who has been in the social service sector for more than 15 years, said she once attended to a client who, for almost six hours, threatened to kill himself or his family.

She was at a loss as to what to say or do at the time. "I continued to have flashbacks of the encounter in my dreams. I felt powerless, spent and inept."

What keeps her going, she said, is support from her supervisor and other social workers.

The clients she works for also keep her grounded and inspired.

She recounted how once, while waiting with a three-year-old child for the doctor, she offered him two small hash browns. Though he was hungry, he told Ms Goh that one was enough.

"This child's basic and developmental needs had been severely neglected, and he was also reported to be the confidant for his carer, who had major depression. He told me his aspiration was to be Spiderman so that he could help others."

"At just three, he understood these big values of care and contentment."

She added: "Through this work, I have met with very young children and older ones who have experienced terrible suffering. But the same individuals showed me how remarkable human resilience can be."

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