

# Guidelines for Social Workers During the Covid-19 Pandemic\*

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## Introduction

Social workers, social care workers, and welfare assistants will be continuing to work with the public during the Covid-19 pandemic. What principles can help them work in anti-oppressive ways while protecting their own health and that of service users so as to ensure that the corona virus is not spread by them, especially to vulnerable others. Most of the skills that social workers have will be relevant even here. These include:

- Treating people with respect and dignity.
- Doing no harm, neither to others nor to yourself.
- Being kind and compassionate within the guidelines for practice that you have already.
- Reduce sources of fear by explaining issues clearly and simply.
- Provide counselling as appropriate, referring people to specialist services, especially around dealing with grief and loss which can include fatalities, but also loss of liberties and normal routines.
- Active listening (keeping 2 m distance) and understanding of the local situation.
- Social distancing wherever possible (staying home, working from home wherever possible, keeping 2 m distance from other people, not attending public gatherings, gigs or other events).
- Following safety precautions as advised by health authorities (wearing masks and/or protective clothing; not touching your face, eyes, nose and mouth especially; washing hands frequently and properly; binning used tissues and other paper products immediately; disinfecting hard surfaces you might touch; self-isolating if you think you are ill, for at least 14 days – I have provided separate guidelines on these points); not touching your mask after you have put it on until you take it off. If correctly fitted around your face, you should not need to touch it. Dispose in double plastic bag.
- Give service users advance warning (electronically or by post) if you are going to turn up on their doorstep looking like a spaceman or woman.

Here, I want to focus on additional issues that you ought to consider. These require you to be extra vigilant, particularly in spotting vulnerabilities while looking for strengths and capabilities to build upon; being critically reflective, including of your own practice; being aware of the impact of social issues such as poverty, discriminatory practices and substance misuse; knowing what resources are available among individuals, families and communities (do this by obtaining a community profile and identifying available resources and gaps before you leave your office where possible); and knowing how to access alternative resources; referring service users to other agencies; training and looking after volunteers who support you; and obtaining training and supervision so that you can do your job to the best of your ability.

## Uncertain territory

The Covid-19 virus is new, and there are not many guidelines that have been tested in place. So, we are entering unknown and uncertain territory. In these circumstances, it is important we learn from each other including those from overseas, and use our reflective, critical and innovative capacities to check out what others say and improvise new solutions in a coproduced way that are tailored to our locality specific circumstances and are culturally relevant to the setting. Below are some points you may wish to consider if you are doing home visits, agency visits or going anywhere else to deliver services to those requiring them:

- Stay home if you feel ill. Discuss your situation with your line manager and take the best possible advice through online support in the first instance. Remember you may be carrying the corona virus to vulnerable others without knowing it.
- Be prepared. Think through different scenarios with colleagues before meeting services users and have any necessary information leaflets with you.
- Wear whatever protective clothing is needed in the circumstances you find yourself in.
- Be vigilant and alert in picking up social tensions within relationships. People under stress may be more likely to abuse others, become violent and aggressive or engage in substance misuse.

- Look for signs of emotional, physical and sexual abuse which may become more prevalent with increased contact between close family members who are isolated at home with each other. For older people, this may include financial abuse. Domestic violence is also likely to increase when people are stressed and living in confined spaces.
- Think of activities that you can encourage those staying at home to undertake, including digital ones. Make sure that hands are washed before and after playing games, especially board games, and keep your social distance when playing them.
- People may be having problems getting grocery shopping, so take your thermos flask with you so that you can say you have/had a drink when invited to have one. Shopping might be an issue for some service users, so getting adequately protected and trained volunteers may help with such tasks. If taking food into people's homes, make sure you use disposable gloves and dispose of them once you return to your car. A new pair should be used for each household. Keep hand sanitizers in your car for immediate use too. Keep a bin bag handy.
- Be alert to signs of mental ill health. Individuals may be stressed out with worry stemming from many sources and coping badly. Know how to refer them to appropriately located services.
- Be aware of social isolation, not only among older people, but also families with young children, adolescents and adults who are confined to their homes, many of which will have limited space. What else can they do? Going for walks and keeping a 2 m distance from others.
- Respond sensitively to people who may be worried about their own, their children, their family's or their community's futures. Community uncertainty may be heightened in situations where job losses are high.
- Counselling and grieving and bereavement counselling may be crucial to some people who may experience being deprived of some of their taken-for-granted activities as a loss that they grieve over. Each response will be individual and you should be equipped to understand this. If not, call on someone who does to come with you/go in your place.
- Social work academics and practice teachers should be aware of student poverty, especially as many of them would have held jobs in the catering and leisure industries, and these outlets have closed for now.
- Keep track of where you have been and whom you have been/come into contact with. Make sure this record is always known to your office and on your laptop/mobile phone so that it can be shared with those who need to know. This is particularly important in contact tracing should you become ill.

Finally, stay calm, stay safe, and keep your social distance.

If you have suggestions based on your experience and wish to share these, please contact me at:

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Thank you!

Note:

- \* This document was discussed and considered in depth by BASW England Social Work in Disasters Group and I would like to thank members of the group for their rich contribution in providing feedback and commentary. These have begun to provide a foundation for models of good practice and are being used by members of the Early Implementers Group being hosted by BASW.