



Social Workers Are Paragons of True Grit

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Who are the most powerful, influential, and perhaps most famous individuals recognized for their commitment to innovation and determination? Perhaps Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk come to mind. But can most people name a uniquely gritty individual who is neither a millionaire nor a celebrity? Someone less well known, an average citizen, and a local hero?

Unlike soldiers, police, or firefighters, social workers are not powerful in the eyes of society. Nor are they idols or icons. And yet, many are unsung advocates who devote their lives to helping those whose chances of success are slim to none. Social workers wrangle with broken systems and societal ills. Their commitment to social justice places them in a unique position to help vulnerable and marginalized communities. They see the world through the eyes of those who live in constant struggle and pain. Unlike the mega wealthy, their passion lies in the beauty of creating wealth from within.

The notion of “grit,” posed by professor and psychologist [Angela Duckworth](#), PhD, of the University of Pennsylvania, sums up what it means to persevere in the presence of long-term obstacles. Her findings, from West Point cadets to disadvantaged school kids who experience educational barriers, have one thing in common—a mindset of concentrated effort to achieve long-term goals in the face of challenges and setbacks. It is an unwavering commitment to a cause that, when devoted to in a singular way, leads to the achievement of that goal. Her studies, while mostly academic, do not mention social workers.

We should be meticulous about whom we ascribe the term “gritty” to. Social workers see the battle scars of their clients daily. They see the track marks on the arms of their clients with addiction. They instill hope for clients knowing that relapse is around the corner. They know that about [30%](#) of clients who enter rehab successfully complete treatment. They witness children being removed from their homes when courts determine that neglect and abuse is too potent to ignore. They counsel formerly incarcerated individuals who cannot find housing, much less meaningful work. Social workers know that their LGBTQIA+ clients are significantly more likely to commit [suicide](#) than their nonidentifying peers.

These data suggest that grit is the backbone that keeps social workers going in this grueling, sobering work. Social workers may laud their success stories as defining moments in their careers. But just as frequently, clients will slip, fall, and get knocked down. And social workers are the gritty agents that help to pick up their clients each time.

How can social workers remain gritty in the face of secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout? NASW offers [guidance](#). Safeguards for psychological well-being include time management skills, cognitive restructuring, and stress reduction. Social and interpersonal skills include finding social support, getting professional help, and engaging in social activism. Finally, social workers should always seek supervision, peer support, and role models. It is not a suggestion but rather a mandate of the ethical standards of social work to abide by these practices of self-care. One strength of the social work profession is that there are plenty of resources to guide social workers in dealing with a personal crisis or mental health problem. Seasoned supervisors are meant to help keep their newer social work charges in healthy headspaces. Quality supervisors provide wisdom, guidance, and emotional support.

The [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) recognizes the gravitas of the social work profession: “Social workers help people overcome ... mental illness, addiction, poverty, discrimination, abuse, physical illness, divorce, loss, unemployment, educational problems, and disability. They help prevent crises and counsel individuals, families, and communities to cope more effectively with the stresses of everyday life.”

Clinical social workers help assess, diagnose, and use evidence-based practices. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), individuals seek behavioral health services from licensed clinical social workers at a higher rate than from psychologists and psychiatrists. In other words, both clinical and nonclinical social workers are rock stars in helping most individuals with their psychological needs. As there is overlap of social work and mental health, organizations including the National Alliance on Mental Illness will continue to support the work of social workers. Training, continuing education, and certificate programs help social workers hone their skills while ensuring that they stay up to date to meet the demands of the profession.

Naturally, these skills cannot be learned overnight. It takes time to cultivate best practices, especially for newer social workers. Undoubtedly, students enter the social work profession to make a positive impact and innovate reform. Internships are the building blocks where gritty traits such as determination, perseverance, and fortitude can be cultivated. Indeed, NASW addresses these matters in the handbook *Best Practices in Social Work Supervision*. Under “Conduct of Supervision,” the topic of self-care is discussed. The mere inclusion of self-care underscores the importance of teaching these tools to interns. It also ensures that these skills will be instilled and implemented upon entering the workforce. These skills will lay the groundwork for years of hard work to come, tools that will be needed to remain gritty.

For anyone wishing to make an impact, the question remains: Can grittiness be learned? Yes. Fortunately for social workers, professional mandates and policies provide blueprints for how to learn self-care, become proficient in the field, and take on tough cases. Duckworth may have highlighted certain groups to prove her point. Powerful, influential, and successful people work hard and don’t give up. But let’s not forget that social workers are gritty by nature. They must stay that way to remain in the field.

There are scores of frontline social workers whose tenacity will never be appreciated, will not get made into a movie, will never get written up in a progress note. That’s true grit.

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