

Exploring Burnout Prevention: Self-Care and Coping Strategies for Child Welfare Social Workers in Penang

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Abstract

Burnout among child welfare social workers was a critical issue, manifesting as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, significantly impairing their ability to provide effective support to vulnerable populations. While burnout is a well-explored phenomenon globally, limited attention has been given to its specific manifestations in the Malaysian context. In Penang, the Department of Social Welfare faced the dual challenge of high caseloads and limited resources, which exacerbated the risk of burnout among its social workers. This study aimed to explore the self-care practices and coping strategies employed by child welfare social workers in Penang to mitigate burnout. By identifying effective methods to maintain mental health and professional resilience, this research sought to inform policy and practice, fostering a supportive environment that enhanced the well-being and efficacy of social workers. Through comprehensive analysis and first-hand insights, this study contributed to the growing body of knowledge essential for sustaining a motivated and healthy workforce in the child welfare sector.

Keywords: *Burnout, Child Welfare Social Worker, Coping Strategies, Mental Health, Self-Care Practices.*

Introduction

Social workers are individuals employed to provide support for clients' mental, emotional, and social welfare over an extended period, excluding primarily medical care [1]. There are various contexts in which social workers play a critical and diverse role, including healthcare, social services, and community support. Social workers provide psychosocial support to patients and their families as part of the multidisciplinary team in healthcare [2]. In addition, social workers act as relationship-building agents, offering clients emotional sensitivity and verbal responsiveness [3]. Social workers play a crucial role in improving personal and social functioning at both micro and macro levels. Social workers engage in individual casework, communication, negotiation, and advocacy to address clients' specific needs [4]. Social workers work towards

macro-level changes that impact social determinants of health and well-being [5]. Social issues might be addressed at a larger scale through advocacy efforts, service integration, and community resilience-building activities. Therefore, social workers are often at risk of burnout due to their exposure to difficult social situations, the demanding nature of the job, high workload, lack of managerial support and emotional exhaustion among others [6]. As caseloads grow, new regulations are put in place, and performance standards rise, social workers are under more and more pressure leading to negative impacts on their well-being [7].

Hence, in this study, the researcher investigated how social workers, specifically those who are handling child welfare cases in Penang, prevent burnout by utilizing coping strategies and engaging in self-care practices.

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This research employed a qualitative approach to delve into the experiences, intricacies, and viewpoints of social workers in Penang who face the potential risk of burnout. Through the utilization of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the study uncovered the coping mechanisms and self-care practices employed by social workers in Penang to mitigate the risk of burnout.

Social Work Challenges in Post-normal Times

The COVID-19 pandemic has added new sources of stress to various aspects of life, such as extended working hours and elevated domestic responsibilities [8]. As the world prepares for its fourth year combating this virus, these stressors have become constant and undefined which increases the chances of burnout among everyone [9]. Social workers are facing more difficulties in the current situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic [10], [11]. The surge in demand for their services, coupled with limited resources and increased risks, has placed a significant burden on the well-being of professionals in health and welfare settings [12]. Social worker burnout refers to the specific phenomenon of burnout experienced by individuals working in the field of social work. These professionals typically confront elevated levels of stress and emotional strain as they aid vulnerable communities, handle intricate and demanding situations, manoeuvre through bureaucratic procedures, and balance their boundaries [13]. Furthermore, social workers are always at risk of burnout due to their exposure to difficult social situations, the demanding nature of the job, high workload, lack of managerial support and emotional exhaustion among others [6]. High levels of stress among social workers have long been documented [14] and research has indicated that social workers' total stress predicted their burnout, particularly in terms of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization [15]. Past studies have shown that burnout can have a

detrimental impact on a person's whole life and have negative consequences [16]. Additionally, stress and burnout are factors that contribute to social workers' poor well-being and health outcomes [17], [18] which can exacerbate retention problems.

Child Welfare in Social Work

Child welfare development is a critical aspect of social work, with social workers playing a pivotal role in ensuring the safety and well-being of children and families. Child welfare workers are charged with ensuring that children grow up in safe and nurturing families, and that child welfare systems are responsive to this task [19]. Moreover, child welfare social workers are involved in supporting direct relationships between a child and their parents, emphasizing the importance of reciprocal relationships and well-being in the context of child welfare [20]. The well-being of children is also closely linked to housing stability, with inadequate housing and homelessness representing significant barriers to family stability and child development [21]. Child welfare social workers are also challenged by the burden of working on the frontline of child welfare and protection services, which is well-documented and contributes to the risk of burnout [22]. Moreover, changes in psychological distress among child welfare social workers over time underscore the need to address the mental well-being of these professionals [23].

The challenges faced by child welfare social workers also include maintaining a robust yet non-defensive sense of role, as evidenced by the tensions expressed in their stories [24]. In addition to these challenges, child welfare social workers are tasked with addressing the thin line between support and protection, as well as the delicate balance in sustaining a robust sense of role while working with families in child welfare practice [25]. The digital society has also generated new challenges for child welfare services, adding

another layer of complexity to the work of child welfare social workers [26]. Therefore, child welfare social workers are at high risk of burnout due to the demanding nature of their work, emphasizing the need to address the wellness of these professionals [27]. Within the Malaysian context, studies which specifically look into burnout among social workers remain scarce. Past studies were conducted either using quantitative or using methods to specifically look into factors contributing to burnout, mental health and quality of life of social workers in hospital settings [28][29]. On the contrary, this study focused on social workers dealing primarily with child welfare cases and adopted a qualitative method to provide a more in-depth exploration of burnout prevention, coping strategies, and self-care practices. By doing so, it enriched the body of social work knowledge within the Malaysian context. Burnout among child welfare social workers was a crucial issue that could negatively impact the quality of social services and the overall well-being of the social workers, particularly at the Department of Social Welfare in Penang.

Prevention Strategies

To address burnout among social workers in Malaysia, it is crucial to implement effective prevention strategies. Work-based social support, such as supervisor support and co-worker support, has been found to play a significant role in mitigating the adverse impact of job insecurity and reducing job burnout among employees in various industries, including the hospitality sector [30]. Therefore, fostering a supportive work environment, and promoting social support among social workers can help prevent burnout. Furthermore, addressing the mental health needs of social workers is essential. As society becomes more conscious of mental health issues, the prevalence of mental health issues will decline [31]. Thus, providing access to mental health resources, implementing psychometric assessments to identify burnout, and offering

interventions to support mental well-being can contribute to preventing burnout among social workers [32], [33].

Additionally, promoting work-life balance and ensuring fair assessment and mentoring can help prevent negative well-being and burnout among social workers [34]. This can assist social workers in creating efficient coping strategies to handle stress and emotional demands [35]. By encouraging adaptable coping mechanisms like problem-focused for work-related issues, burnout can be alleviated. Social workers may focus on identifying and treating the root causes of stress to regain effectiveness and control [36]. Establishing solid social support systems may assist social workers cope with the difficulties they encounter. Receiving assistance and support from peers, family, colleagues, or superiors provides emotional support, guidance, and a feeling of a sense of belonging that helps prevent burnout [37]. Supervisors play a crucial role in addressing burnout among social workers, emphasizing the importance of organizational support and leadership in promoting practitioner well-being [38]. Furthermore, effective supervision can help mitigate burnout and compassion fatigue, ultimately benefiting the emotional and mental health of social work professionals [39]. It has been demonstrated that psychological resilience shields social workers from secondary traumatic stress and burnout, highlighting the significance of human resources in fending off the harmful effects of high-stress workplaces [40].

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping provides a framework for comprehending how individuals respond to stressful situations. The theory holds that stress is a result of interactions between an individual and their surroundings [41]. The way that each person perceives the stressor and assesses their

ability to cope with it mediates this exchange. This paradigm emphasises the part that personal assessment and coping strategies play in the process of managing stress. It suggests that an individual's susceptibility to burnout could be impacted by how they interpret and respond to the challenges in their lives. A study explored the relationships between social support and student burnout, revealing a negative correlation between social support and burnout [42]. Furthermore, the relationship between work stress, perceived social support, self-efficacy, and burnout among Chinese registered nurses, highlights the role of social support in mitigating burnout levels [43]. A study on healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia explored the demographic and work-related factors associated with burnout, resilience, and quality of life [44]. Lazarus's transactional model of stress and coping provided valuable insights into how social workers in the Department of Social Welfare handled the stressors associated with their work, including burnout. In the context of the study, social workers engaged in primary appraisal, where they evaluated the demands of their work and the resources available to cope with them. They often perceived their workload, emotional challenges, and organizational constraints as significant stressors, contributing to feelings of burnout

Furthermore, Lazarus's model highlighted the role of coping strategies in managing stress. Social workers in this study employed various coping mechanisms and reflected Lazarus's notion of secondary appraisal, where individuals evaluate their ability to cope with stressors and choose coping strategies accordingly. Overall, this model provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the stressors and coping mechanisms experienced by social workers in JKM. By recognizing the transactional nature of stress and the importance of appraisal and coping processes, the study underscored the need for

interventions aimed at enhancing social workers' coping skills and promoting adaptive strategies for managing burnout in the child welfare context.

Resilience Theory

Resilience theory offers a useful framework for comprehending how social workers might manage stress and difficulties in their profession. It is predicated on adaptive capacity and the power to bounce back from setbacks [45]. Resilience theory provides insights into the elements that promote social workers' professional efficacy and well-being by looking at coping mechanisms, social support, and personality traits. This perspective underscores the necessity for social workers to develop adaptive strategies and build resilience to tackle multifaceted challenges in their practice [46]. The literature in Asian contexts highlights the significance of social capital and social identity in promoting employee resilience in public organisations. This helps to clarify how social connections and organisational support facilitate individual resilience [47], [48]. These studies highlight the role that social resources and identity play in helping social workers in culturally diverse contexts build resilience.

In the Malaysian context, the impact of globalization on social work practice and the history and development of social work in Malaysia [49][50]. These studies highlight the evolving social, cultural, and economic contexts that shape social work practice in Malaysia, emphasizing the need for resilience in navigating complex social issues. Furthermore, the state of social work education and the influence of social support on employee resilience in the Malaysian public sector [51][52]. These studies underscore the role of education, organizational support, and social resources in promoting resilience among social workers and employees in Malaysia. In the face of challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, predictors of resilience and work engagement during the pandemic, highlight the importance

of resilience in maintaining well-being and performance [53][54]. These studies provide insights into the factors that enhance resilience and work engagement among individuals in Malaysia amidst crises. Resilience Theory played a crucial role in understanding how social workers in Department of Social Welfare managed burnout within child welfare. It highlighted their ability to bounce back from adversity, drawing on personal and contextual resources. In this study, social workers demonstrated resilience through their commitment to their work despite challenges, driven by a passion for social justice. They relied on supportive relationships and engaged in self-care practices to mitigate burnout. Moreover, organizational support and a culture of collaboration were vital in promoting resilience. Overall, this theory provided insight into how social workers navigated burnout, emphasizing the importance of promoting resilience in addressing challenges within child welfare.

Methods

In this study, the researchers explored this study using qualitative research method. In conducting qualitative research to explore social worker burnout within the context of the Department of Social Welfare in Penang, it is essential to adopt a rigorous methodological approach that provides in-depth insights into the experiences and perceptions of social workers. Qualitative research offers a nuanced understanding of human experiences, context, and social phenomena, providing deeper insights into the factors contributing to burnout among social workers [55]. By employing qualitative methods, researchers captured the rich narratives and perspectives of social workers, and shed light on the challenges they faced in their professional roles. This study aimed to explore the strategies employed by child welfare social workers to prevent burnout, focusing on their coping mechanisms and self-care practices. To accomplish that aim, the

study attempted to answer the research question, 'How do child welfare social workers in Penang use coping strategies and self-care practices to prevent burnout?' Ten child welfare social workers from the Children Unit, Department of Social Welfare, (*Timur Laut*) Penang were interviewed by the researchers. The Children Unit only has ten officers, the researchers engaged with each individual of the team to obtain the most insightful information. Nonetheless, the child welfare social workers' education and/or training in social work practice, together with a minimum of two years of experience working in the Children's Unit, were the requirements for inclusion in this research.

Findings and Discussions

In the field of child welfare social work at the Department of Social Welfare, Penang, Malaysia, social and family support played a crucial role in mitigating workplace stress and promoting overall well-being. Social workers often deal with emotionally taxing situations and overwhelming caseloads, making robust support systems essential. Interpersonal connections and familial relationships provided encouragement, validation, and solace, enabling social workers to navigate professional challenges more effectively. Supportive colleagues, supervisors, and peers within the organization offered a sense of solidarity and validation, while constructive feedback and collaboration among team members enhanced problem-solving skills and collective efficacy. Familial relationships were pivotal in bolstering resilience and well-being, with understanding and encouragement from family members providing emotional reinforcement.

Sharing experiences and seeking guidance from loved ones offered invaluable perspective and comfort. Spirituality and faith also provided strength and comfort, helping some social workers maintain a positive outlook. Friendships formed through shared experiences

transcended workplace boundaries, offering companionship and solidarity beyond the work environment. Self-reward was a crucial component of self-care, allowing social workers to replenish emotional reserves, acknowledge efforts, and foster well-being. Activities like shopping, exploring new cafes, spending time with friends, enjoying outdoor walks, and engaging in self-pampering practices helped social workers relax, rejuvenate, and prioritize well-being. Social media became a valuable resource for alleviating stress, offering platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram for support, experience-sharing, and encouragement. These online communities mitigated feelings of isolation and burnout.

Connecting with colleagues, family, and friends provided validation, reassurance, and perspective, strengthening coping strategies and resilience. Brief social media interactions allowed social workers to step away from work pressures and find emotional support. Engaging with light-hearted content on social media served as an adaptive coping mechanism, providing temporary relief from stressors and helping social workers recharge. Humorous or uplifting content releases endorphins, improving mood and reducing stress. Sharing funny memes and uplifting stories fostered a sense of community and solidarity, creating a positive work culture. Motivational talks on platforms like YouTube uplifted spirits and instilled optimism, while sharing sessions on Facebook provided comfort and validation. A balanced approach to social media usage was essential to ensure it enhanced well-being and effectiveness. Engaging with updates from favourite celebrities offered brief escapes from work demands, providing opportunities to unwind and recharge.

Theme 1: Social & Family Support

In the context of a social work setting within Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM), this research concentrated on exploring coping strategies and self-care practices employed by child welfare social workers to navigate the challenges of their profession. One prominent theme that emerges is the crucial role of social and family support in mitigating workplace stress and promoting overall well-being. Child welfare social workers often grapple with emotionally taxing situations and overwhelming caseloads, making it essential for them to have robust support systems in place. The theme of social and family supports the significance of interpersonal connections and familial relationships in reducing the impact of workplace stressors. These support networks serve as invaluable sources of encouragement, validation, and solace, enabling social workers to navigate their professional challenges more effectively. The presence of supportive colleagues, supervisors, and peers within the organization can provide child welfare social workers with a sense of camaraderie and solidarity. Knowing that they have a network of empathetic individuals who understand the unique demands of their profession can offer much-needed validation and emotional support. Additionally, constructive feedback and collaboration among team members can enhance problem-solving skills and foster a sense of collective efficacy in addressing complex cases.

The theme of social and family support highlights the pivotal role of familial relationships in bolstering social workers' resilience and well-being. The understanding and encouragement of family members can provide social workers with a sense of belonging and emotional reinforcement outside of the workplace. Moreover, the ability to share their experiences and seek guidance from loved ones can offer invaluable perspective and comfort during challenging times. Informant 1's need for his family's support is evidence of the

crucial part that relationships with family members provide in sustaining well-being, especially in the relentless field of child welfare social work. Informant 1 finds comfort and optimism in his wife's continuous support and understanding during the difficulties of extremely challenging and busy days. His appreciation of his family's steadfast support especially his wife, highlights the critical role that relations with others have in assisting people navigate the difficulties of their line of work.

Furthermore, Informant 1's acknowledgement of his team's cooperation emphasises how important relationships with colleagues and teamwork are to reducing stress and building resilience in the workplace. Through mutual understanding and collaboration, Informant 1 and his team members foster an environment of support where they can lean on one another for guidance, validation, and encouragement, thereby bolstering their ability to cope with the demands of child welfare social work. In the demanding landscape of child welfare social work, Informant 3's reliance on her family and friends for guidance and support exemplifies the importance of social connections in enhancing well-being. Their willingness to offer advice and lend a listening ear provides Informant 3 with a vital outlet for processing the complexities of her workload. Through heartfelt conversations and shared experiences, Informant 3 finds solace in knowing that she has a network of supportive friends, and social support who stand by her side, offering empathy, encouragement, and practical assistance in times of need.

Moreover, Informant 3's mention of prayer as a coping mechanism highlights the significance of spirituality and faith in sustaining resilience. Amidst the pressures and uncertainties of her profession, prayer serves as a source of strength and comfort, allowing Informant 3 to find solace and renewal in moments of adversity. Engaging in prayer

offers her a sense of inner peace and perspective, enabling her to maintain a positive outlook and navigate challenges with grace and determination. Informant 4's mention of forming friendships beyond the confines of roles highlights the deeper connections forged through shared experiences and mutual support. These friendships transcend the boundaries of the workplace, providing a sense of companionship and solidarity that extends beyond the work environment. In times of uncertainty and adversity, these relationships offer a source of comfort and resilience, enabling social workers to navigate challenges with greater confidence and determination. His portrayal of a supportive work environment emphasizes the significance of teamwork and open communication in fostering resilience and managing stress. Meanwhile, in Informant 5's story, she talks about how her family, especially her mom, helps her feel stronger. Just by talking to her mom, all her worries disappear. The mere act of reaching out to her mother, whether through a phone call or a visit, serves as a powerful balm for her weary soul, combats her worries and rejuvenates her spirit. Through these cherished interactions, Informant 5 derives the strength and resilience needed to confront the myriad challenges of her profession with courage and fortitude. Informant 5's experience shows how important family support is for social workers. By getting love and understanding from her family, Informant 5 feels stronger and more capable of handling her job. This support helps her face the challenges of child welfare social work with courage.

Informant 6 relies on her family as a source of stability and comfort, describing them as lifelines that anchor her amidst the challenges she faces. The unwavering support and understanding offered by her loved ones serve as a crucial source of solace and encouragement, providing Informant 6 with the strength and determination needed to persevere in her role. Moreover, Informant 6's recognition

of her colleagues as friends highlights the significance of teamwork and solidarity within the workplace. The sense of community and mutual support fostered among colleagues create a supportive environment where Informant 6 feels valued and understood. Knowing that her colleagues are there to listen and offer support bolsters her resilience and fortitude, enabling her to confront the demands of her profession with courage and determination.

The significance of social and family support in mitigating burnout among child welfare social workers in Penang cannot be overstated. The study explores family coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdown, the research identifies coping strategies at different levels. These include macro-environmental factors such as social relationships, support provided by society, and relationship factors like family time and conversations [56]. The significance of social and family support as coping mechanisms during challenging situations, shedding light on how these factors can help individuals and families navigate difficult circumstances. Social and family support are essential coping strategies in social work, providing professionals with emotional, practical, and relational resources to navigate the challenges and stressors inherent in their roles [57]. The impact of social support in preventing burnout syndrome among nurses. Similarly, in the context of social work, social support can serve as a buffer against burnout, offering a sense of belonging, validation, and assistance in managing work-related stress [58].

Family support, as highlighted in the study on defining autistic burnout, can also be instrumental in coping with stress and preventing burnout. In social work practice, family support can provide social workers with a sense of connection, understanding, and encouragement, which are essential for maintaining well-being and resilience in demanding and emotionally taxing situations. By leveraging social and family support as coping strategies, social workers can enhance their ability to manage stress, maintain a healthy work-life balance, and sustain their motivation and passion for their work. These forms of support can offer a sense of community, validation, and emotional sustenance, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being and effectiveness of social work professionals [59].

Resilience theory is essential in understanding how supportive teamwork can improve the well-being and effectiveness of social work professionals. The impact of teamwork on resilience among healthcare professionals, emphasizing the importance of teamwork in fostering resilience and mitigating burnout. While the study specifically addresses healthcare professionals, its findings can be applied to social work practice, highlighting the significance of supportive teamwork in promoting resilience and coping with challenges in the field [60]. The research indicates that teamwork is a crucial factor in enhancing resilience among healthcare professionals, which in turn can help reduce burnout and improve overall well-being.

Table 1. Interview Excerpts: To Identify the Coping Strategies and Self-care Practices to Prevent Burnout among Child Welfare Social Workers in Penang. (Theme 1)

Informants	Key Findings	Interview Excerpts
Informant 1	Supportive family and colleagues	<i>“My family's great support especially my wife has been a constant source of strength for me, especially during particularly difficult and busy days. My team is amazing, very supportive and</i>

		<i>we can rely on each other for emotional support, also share the burden of our caseloads.”</i>
Informant 3	Supportive friends and family, spiritual	<i>“I’m thankful for my friends and family, who I can turn to for advice and support in managing the stress of my workload. Prayers too, help me in keeping my head up high..”</i>
Informant 4	Supportive colleagues	<i>“At work, we all work together to discuss the complex aspects of what we do, exchanging ideas, methods, and emotional support. Through communication and shared experiences, we form friendships that beyond the bounds of our roles, providing comfort and resilience in times of uncertainty.</i>
Informant 5	Supportive family	<i>“My family, of course... especially my mom is the source of my strength... just by calling her all my worries and problems disappear!”</i>
Informant 6	Supportive family and colleagues	<i>“My family are lifelines that keep me sane. and my colleagues, are my friends too. just knowing that they are there to listen, our loved ones and colleagues provide me with the resilience and courage to persevere.”</i>

Theme 2: Self-Reward

In the demanding landscape of child welfare social work within the Department of Social Welfare, self-reward serves as an important component of self-care, offering child welfare social workers the opportunity to replenish their emotional reserves, acknowledge their efforts, and foster a sense of well-being amidst the challenges they encounter in daily basis. Self-reward encompasses activities that promote relaxation, enjoyment, and stress reduction. Child welfare social workers can indulge in hobbies, such as painting, gardening, or playing a musical instrument, that provide an outlet for creativity and relaxation. Additionally, activities like reading a book, taking a leisurely walk, or enjoying a favourite meal can serve as simple yet effective ways to unwind and recharge after a demanding day.

Engaging in activities such as cooking not only provides a welcome respite from the stresses of work but also offers a therapeutic outlet for self-expression and creativity. For

Informant 2, the act of cooking serves as a form of mindfulness, allowing him to immerse himself fully in the present moment and savour the simple pleasures of preparing a homemade meal. This mindful approach to cooking can be deeply grounding, helping social workers like Informant 2 alleviate stress, reduce anxiety, and cultivate a sense of inner calm amidst the chaos of their workload. Furthermore, cooking alongside his wife provides Informant 2 with an opportunity for connection and shared enjoyment, strengthening their bond and fostering emotional support. In the context of self-care, nurturing positive relationships and seeking support from loved ones are essential aspects of maintaining resilience and coping with the challenges of child welfare work.

Engaging in activities such as reading provides Informant 5 with a much-needed opportunity for relaxation, escape, and rejuvenation. Immersing herself in the world of literature allows her to temporarily disconnect from the pressures of work and immerse herself

in a different reality, finding solace and tranquillity in the pages of her favourite books. This form of self-care rewards herself and enables Informant 5 to recharge her mental and emotional batteries, alleviate stress, and cultivate a sense of inner peace amidst the challenges she faces in her role as a child welfare social worker. In addition, Informant 5's passion for reading shows how crucial it is to engage in pursuits that connect with one's passions and interests to take care of oneself. Social workers may improve their general well-being, create a feeling of personal fulfilment, and refuel by engaging in interests and activities that make them happy and fulfilled. Informant 5 emphasises the ongoing and developing character of self-care, citing the number of unread books lying about to be explored as a reserve of potential moments of joy and relaxation.

Engaging in activities such as shopping provides Informant 6 with a much-needed opportunity for relaxation, enjoyment, and rejuvenation. Exploring the aisles of her favourite stores, window shopping and indulging in retail therapy allows her to temporarily escape from the stresses of work and immerse herself in the pleasure of discovering new items and treating herself to something special. This form of self-care serves as a self-reward, enabling Informant 6 to lift her mood, alleviate stress, and cultivate a sense of personal satisfaction amidst the demands of her role as a child welfare social worker. Furthermore, Informant 6's enjoyment of shopping underscores the importance of finding activities that resonate with one's interests and preferences as part of self-care. By indulging in hobbies and pursuits that bring joy and fulfilment, social workers can replenish their energy reserves, foster a sense of well-being, and enhance their overall quality of life. For Informant 6, the act of shopping represents not only a means of purchasing new items but also a form of self-expression and self-care,

allowing her to prioritize her own needs and desires amidst her professional responsibilities.

Engaging in activities such as exploring new cafes and trying their offerings provides Informant 8 with a valuable opportunity to reward herself and replenish her energy reserves. Immersing herself in the vibrant atmosphere of Georgetown City and indulging in culinary delights allows her to temporarily escape from the stresses of work and savour the simple pleasures of life. This form of self-care serves as a means of self-acknowledgment and self-validation, enabling Informant 8 to recognize her efforts and contributions as a child welfare social worker and celebrate her successes, no matter how small. Moreover, Informant 8's enjoyment of food hunting underscores the importance of finding activities that bring joy and fulfilment as part of self-care. By prioritizing experiences that resonate with her interests and preferences, such as exploring new culinary delights, she can enhance her overall well-being and cultivate a sense of happiness and satisfaction in her life. For Informant 8, the act of food hunting is not only a means of treating herself but also a form of self-expression and self-care, allowing her to nurture her own needs and desires. Engaging in activities such as spending time with friends, enjoying outdoor walks, and indulging in self-pampering activities provides Informant 10 with valuable opportunities to relax, rejuvenate, and nurture herself. Connecting with friends and immersing herself in the beauty of nature allows her to temporarily escape from the stresses of work and cultivate a sense of joy and connection. Watching Netflix serves as a form of entertainment and relaxation, offering her a chance to unwind and recharge after a long day of work. Apart from that, getting facial treatment is a way for Informant 10 to pamper herself and prioritise her well-being despite her work obligations. It's an example of self-care and self-acknowledgment.

Informant 10's enjoyment of these activities underscores the importance of finding moments

of respite and enjoyment amidst the demands of work. Her energy reserves, stress levels, and general quality of life may all be improved by giving leisure time and self-care routines top priority. Along with to providing a way for

Informant 10 to relieve stress, these activities also serve as a kind of self-love and self-care, enabling her to put her own needs and wellbeing first throughout her demanding work as a child welfare social worker.

Table 2. Interview Excerpts: To Identify the Coping Strategies and Self-care Practices to Prevent Burnout among Child Welfare Social Workers in Penang. (Theme 2)

Informants	Key Findings	Interview Excerpts
Informant 2	Hobby – Cooking	<i>“As a food enthusiast, I find joy in trying new recipes and experimenting with flavors in my kitchen.. like Khairul Aming! Cooking has become a therapeutic outlet, allowing me to express creativity and savor the simple pleasures of a homemade meal.”</i>
Informant 5	Hobby – Reading	<i>“After a long day of home visits and case management, I unwind by immersing myself in my favorite novel, finding peace and relaxation in its pages.. I have so many books that I have yet to read!”</i>
Informant 6	Leisure – Retail	<i>“After a particularly challenging week at work, I treat myself for shopping at malls and indulging in some retail therapy to lift my spirits..”</i>
Informant 8	Leisure – Food hunts	<i>“I’ll recharge myself with going for food hunting at cafes and trying what’s new on the menu... usually once a week! It’s expensive but worth it especially to make myself feel better...”</i>
Informant 10	Self-pamper	<i>“Just hanging out with friends, and going for a walk at the park in the morning during weekends. Watch Netflix and when I have extra money, I’ll go for facial treatment”</i>

Self-reward emerges as a vital component of self-care among child welfare social workers in Penang, offering them opportunities to replenish their emotional reserves and acknowledge their efforts amidst the challenges they face. To address burnout in social work, it is crucial to prioritize self-care practices. Research indicates that integrating self-care skills into daily practice is essential to prevent burnout [61]. Studies have shown that adopting adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support and utilizing positive coping

mechanisms, can help prevent burnout [62], [36]. Additionally, self-care practices like trauma-informed self-care, seeking supervision, balancing caseloads, and developing a work-life balance plan have been identified as protective against burnout [63]. Moreover, self-care agency and practice have been linked to reducing burnout risk and enhancing compassion satisfaction [64].

Immersing in activities that bring joy and fulfilment can alleviate stress, cultivate a sense of inner peace, and enhance their overall well-

being. Hence, effective coping skills and a strong support system are vital for individuals to cope with burnout in their profession [65]. Retail therapy, the act of shopping to alleviate negative moods, has been recognized as a coping mechanism to alleviate stress. Studies suggest that retail therapy is an effective strategy to instantly lift emotional discomfort and meet psychological needs [66]. Past studies also indicated that retail therapy can serve as a coping mechanism to reduce perceived stress, especially during challenging times [67]. Therefore, by treating themselves to something special and engaging in activities that resonate with their interests, social workers can foster a sense of personal satisfaction and rejuvenation amidst the demands of their profession and hinder stress.

Theme 3: Social Media Utilization

Within the field of social work at the Department of Social Welfare, the topic of social media utilisation reveals internet platforms may provide child welfare social workers with resources to alleviate stress. In a way, social media can reduce stress through the establishment of online support groups or communities. These digital spaces such as YouTube, Facebook (FB), and Instagram (IG) offer a platform for sharing experiences, seeking advice, and offering encouragement, fostering a sense of support that can alleviate feelings of isolation and burnout. Connecting with others such as colleagues, family and friends who share your perspective and are familiar with the complexities of the field may be a great way to validate, reassure, and get perspective, all of which can strengthen social workers' coping strategies and resilience.

Taking just 10-15 minutes to browse through social media allows Informant 3 to temporarily step away from the pressures of her work and immerse herself in the familiar and comforting world of her family and friends. By checking in on their updates and activities, she feels a sense of closeness and connection, which serves as a

source of emotional support and reassurance during stressful times. Additionally, seeing her family's updates provides Informant 3 with a sense of perspective and reminds her of the broader context of her life beyond her professional responsibilities. Furthermore, Informant 3's enjoyment of connecting with her family on social media underscores the importance of maintaining strong social connections and seeking support from loved ones as part of self-care. By engaging in these brief moments of connection, she can alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation, boosting her resilience, and enhancing her overall well-being. Moreover, the ability to watch funny videos and enjoy entertainment on social media platforms, such as following lighthearted content or updates from favourite celebrities, can serve as a valuable form of adaptive coping. Taking breaks to indulge in humorous or uplifting content can provide temporary relief from work-related stressors, offering a much-needed mental escape and helping social workers recharge and regain perspective. For Informant 6, taking a break from the intensity of her caseload to indulge in watching funny videos on YouTube or Reels on Facebook, or enjoying influencers' content on Instagram, serves as a valuable means of relaxation and distraction amidst the demands of her work as a child welfare social worker. By taking her time to watch funny videos or enjoy entertaining content on social media platforms, Informant 6 can temporarily step away from the stresses of her caseload and immerse herself in light-hearted and enjoyable content.

Informant 6 finds that watching humorous videos and engaging content gives her a much-needed break from the stress of her profession, allowing her to relax and get perspective, even if only briefly. Laughter and enjoyment have been shown to release endorphins, which can improve mood and reduce stress levels, contributing to overall well-being and self-fulfilment. By leveraging social media in these ways, child welfare social workers can harness

its potential as a tool for adaptive coping and self-fulfilment, finding solace, connection, and moments of joy amidst the demands of their profession. To share funny memes or uplifting stories creates a sense of community and solidarity among Informant 7 and her colleagues as stated by her. By collectively engaging in light-hearted and enjoyable content, they create opportunities for laughter and shared experiences, which serve to uplift spirits and provide much-needed relief from the pressures of their work. Furthermore, Informant 7's enjoyment of sharing laughs with colleagues underscores the importance of building supportive relationships and fostering a positive work culture within the child welfare agency. For Informant 7 and her colleagues, the act of sharing funny memes and uplifting stories is not just about having a good laugh but also about empowering one another and navigating the demands of their work together.

In the case of Informant 9, she finds peace and inspiration in watching motivational talks on YouTube, relishing in their ability to uplift her spirits and provide a much-needed boost to her mood. In the fast-paced and emotionally demanding environment of her work, where child welfare social workers are often confronted with challenging situations and heavy caseloads, finding moments of positivity and encouragement is essential for maintaining resilience and well-being. Also, it allows her to immerse herself in messages of hope and empowerment. These videos serve as powerful reminders of the resilience of the human spirit and the potential for positive change, instilling in Informant 9 a sense of optimism and determination to persevere in the face of adversity. By actively seeking out content that

inspires and uplifts her, Informant 9 cultivates a mindset of positivity and resilience, enabling her to navigate the challenges of her work with greater fortitude and resolve.

Additionally, Informant 9 finds comfort and support in connecting with other social workers or friends through sharing sessions on Facebook. By connecting with others who share similar professional experiences, Informant 9 feels validated and understood, easing some of the stress and isolation that can resonate with her work in child welfare. However, it's essential for social workers to maintain a balanced approach to social media usage, ensuring that it enhances rather than detracts from their well-being and effectiveness in their roles. Meanwhile as for Informant 10, by engaging with updates from her favourite celebrities on social media allows her to momentarily escape the demands of her work and immerse herself in the world of entertainment. By indulging in content that she finds enjoyable and entertaining, such as updates from celebrities, Informant 10 can temporarily shift her focus away from the stresses of her job and find respite in the realm of entertainment. This brief escape provides her with a much-needed opportunity to recharge and rejuvenate, helping to alleviate tension and restore her energy levels. Furthermore, scrolling through updates from her favourite celebrities on social media enables Informant 10 to engage in leisure activities that bring her joy and pleasure. Whether it's watching funny videos, reading news or posts, or keeping up with the latest entertainment news, these moments of entertainment serve as valuable opportunities for Informant 10 to unwind and relax.

Table 3. Interview Excerpts: To Identify the Coping Strategies and Self-care Practices to Prevent Burnout among Child Welfare Social Workers in Penang. (Theme 3)

Informants	Key Findings	Interview Excerpts
Informant 3	FB, IG	<i>“My family lives in Perak, so sometimes if the day is so stressful I’ll take 10-15 minutes just browsing on FB and IG, catching up with my family’s updates.. and seeing my friend’s activities..”</i>
Informant 6	YouTube, FB, IG	<i>“Taking a break from the intensity of my caseload to watch funny videos on YouTube or Reels on FB or enjoy influencers’ content on IG allows me to unwind and regain perspective, even if just for a few moments.. like a good way to distract..”</i>
Informant 7	IG	<i>“Sometimes we in the office, sharing laughs over funny memes or uplifting stories shared on IG brings a sense of joy that eases the burden of our demanding workloads or difficult cases..”</i>
Informant 9	YouTube, FB	<i>“I love those inspirational talks videos on Youtube, the short ones but can really lift my mood... and FB sharing session just simply connecting with other social workers, or friends can ease some stress too!”</i>
Informant 10	FB, IG	<i>“Scrolling through updates from my favourite celebrities on social media provides a good distraction from the stresses of work, like a brief escape into the world of entertainment and allowing me to recharge and ease my day..”</i>

Social media can serve as a potential coping mechanism to prevent burnout in social work. Research has shown that social media can have a positive impact on mental health by promoting positive mental health outcomes and providing social support [68]. Additionally, social media platforms offer channels for connections, marketing, and information seeking, which can be beneficial for mental

health [69]. Moreover, social media has the potential to promote positive mental health by connecting individuals and allowing them to feel more connected to their family and friends [70]. However, it is essential to consider the potential drawbacks of social media use. However, studies have highlighted the importance of controlling social media use to prevent addiction and promote greater mental

health among adolescents [71]. Excessive time spent on social media may lead to social media addiction, which can result in less time spent on other activities, potentially contributing to burnout [72]. The impact of social media on burnout can be mediated by the emotions experienced when comparing oneself to others on social media [73]. Therefore, while social media can be a valuable tool for promoting mental health and preventing burnout by providing social support and connectivity, it is crucial to use it mindfully and in moderation to avoid potential negative consequences such as addiction and emotional distress.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study shed light on the issue of burnout among child welfare social workers in the Department of Social Welfare Penang, Malaysia, emphasizing the importance of preventive measures, coping strategies, and self-care practices. The findings underscored the significant role of social and family support in mitigating workplace stress and promoting overall well-being among the Department of Social Welfare social workers. Supportive colleagues, supervisors, and family members served as crucial resources for buffering the effects of emotional exhaustion and workload demands. Fostering a supportive work environment and cultivating strong interpersonal relationships were essential for enhancing resilience and coping mechanisms. Furthermore, the investigation into self-reward as a coping strategy highlighted the importance of engaging in activities that promoted relaxation, enjoyment, and stress reduction. From cooking and reading to shopping and exploring new cafes, social workers found

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solace and rejuvenation in various leisure pursuits, prioritizing their well-being amidst professional challenges. Moreover, the study explored the role of social media utilization as both a source of support and a means of adaptive coping for social workers. By connecting with online communities, sharing experiences, and seeking entertainment or inspiration, social workers alleviated feelings of isolation, found moments of respite, and fostered a sense of connection and solidarity. However, the findings also underscored the pervasive nature of burnout among social workers and the need for comprehensive interventions to address this issue. From workload pressures to organizational factors, multiple approaches encompassing individual, organizational, and systemic levels of intervention were necessary. Moving forward, policymakers, educators, practitioners, and researchers need to collaborate to develop evidence-based strategies for preventing burnout, promoting well-being, and sustaining a resilient social work workforce in Malaysia. Prioritizing supportive work environments, implementing effective self-care practices, and addressing systemic issues contributing to burnout were crucial steps. By investing in the well-being of social workers, society ultimately invested in the well-being of society as a whole.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study from either party involved.

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