

## **For the Right Frame of Mind**

- *By Shrutee Ganguly*

Earlier this year, the WHO recognized burnout as an occupational phenomenon, bringing into sharp focus the correlation between work and mental health. However, in the social development sector, several factors combine to magnify the problem.

Whether in social development or disaster scenarios, the emotional needs of the communities affected are addressed immediately, as they should be. What is often left out are the social workers who might struggle with their own mental wellbeing.

The term vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic disorder is often used to describe the occupational challenge of people working and volunteering in the fields of victim services and other allied professions.

A recent dipstick study carried out by Dalberg Advisors and Youth Alliance on the mental health of social impact professionals working in India provided several alarming findings, including the fact that two of five professionals reported disrupted sleep pattern or reduced quality of sleep due to work-related stress<sup>1</sup>.

Part of what makes some non-profit work psychologically challenging for professionals is the compressed, intensified nature of operations. Some of the workers in this situation are more vulnerable than others. It could be because of any prior traumatic experience, lack of preparation for the role, constant exposure to trauma, lack of support function in the job or just being reserved with personal emotions.

Some of the symptoms to look out for could be: continuous fatigue, frequent emotional outbursts, physical challenges, and lack of participation.

To better manage the mental health of the workers and respondents, it is crucial to regularly engage with them and assess their mental health. At Sattva, for instance, employees are frequently tested on these even during a regular workday. Interviewing commercial sex workers on their challenges in rehabilitation as part of programme evaluation, or analysing numbers showing abysmal figures on acute undernourishment of children can be extremely intense. Many times one feels helpless and hopeless. Being firmly grounded in solving problems and unwavering focus on the larger purpose help. But how do we ensure that we take care of it for everyone?

Providing guidelines for working during difficult situations, along with adequate training in physiological and mental aspects can help build resilience. In the face of adversity, lack of systems, poorly prepared infrastructure to facilitate operations, inadequate response

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thewire.in/health/mental-health-social-impact-professionals>

capacity and no mental health component embedded in support services build frustration and stress.

Organizations and workers need to be aware of these challenges along with the cultural aspects of the affected demography to prepare well prior to dealing with such incidents. At Sattva, for instance, we have introduced several initiatives (see box), and more importantly, a safe environment where mental well-being can be discussed openly. Recognizing efforts and empowering the staff can have a positive effect in such volatile environments.

### **Sattva Wellness Initiatives**

**Induction with Immersion:** We pair up a work buddy for our new employees when they join. This builds a system where new recruits can take the help of more experienced employees in any situation.

**Mindfulness Rituals:** We have created rituals where we get together regularly to focus on mindfulness and being present in the moment.

**Employee Happiness Survey:** We have an internal framework using which employees periodically report on their state of well-being, connectedness with the purpose and issues that are bothering them.

**Mentoring and Counselling:** All employees at Sattva have access to experienced senior mentors. We have a tie-up with a counselling firm. We ensure that employees know that safe spaces for them to open up and qualified help are available.

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*Sattva has been working with various non-profits and social organisations as well as corporate clients to help them define their social impact goals. Our focus is to solve critical problems and find scalable solutions. We assist organisations in formulating their long-term social impact strategy by strategically aligning with business to provide meaningful solutions to social issues.*

*We'd love to hear your thoughts and feedback on this topic. Do write to us:  
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