**AUSJ**

**A Unique Social Work Journey**

**The Rationale**

Social workers working with disadvantaged populations over many years may experience burnout and incur damage to their wellbeing (Poulin & Walter, 1993; Siebert, 2005). Acker (1999) found that professional involvement in the patients’ lives leads to psychological fatigue and emotional detachment among social workers.

Moreover, it was found that among social workers working with victims of domestic violence, some had suffered impairment to their mental wellbeing, feelings of despondency, impatience, and fatigue that stayed with them even after they returned home at the end of their workday (Ben-Porat & Itzhaky, 2014).

According to Maslach’s (1982) burnout model, burnout comprises three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, i.e. loss of the sense of connection to coworkers and customers, and reduced efficiency and personal accomplishment, which lead to low self-esteem.

Bar-Gal and Guttman (1996) examined burnout among social workers engaged in direct treatment. They found that a sense of “occupational challenge” was a strong factor in reducing burnout, a term referring to the level of challenge and satisfaction experienced on the job, as well as the sense of contentment and effectiveness in providing the service and retaining one’s position (Bar-Gal & Guttman, 1996).

It was found that interesting and challenging work contributes to social workers’ satisfaction and serves to prevent burnout. A workplace that is not sufficiently challenging or interesting and offers no possibilities for personal development and fulfillment leads to burnout, emotional emptiness, and a low sense of achievement, as well as the emergence of an objectifying approach (depersonalization) toward those seeking the service (Caspi, 1985). In this context, “venting” sessions with colleagues are no less important.

**The Project**

AUSJ is a two-year program that we are proposing with the aim of increasing the level of challenge and interest social workers experience in their role. The program aims to promote, develop, and strengthen the sense of personal connection among the work teams and between the work teams and academia. The goal of the program is to strengthen these components (challenge, personal development, innovation, and the connection with academia), and thereby reduce burnout among social workers. AUSJ will work to create a space of partnership between academia and social workers operating in the field for the purpose of extracting the accumulated native knowledge among professionals and documenting it in writing.

A pilot of the program took place during the 2018–2019 academic year and was accompanied by a study conducted in the social services department in Hura.

Fourteen social workers participated in the program, accompanied by the School of Social Work at Sapir College.

In the first part of the program, the social workers participated in three days of practical experience with equine-assisted therapy, using the Eagala model. This experience was accompanied by a qualitative study.

The initial study findings indicate that the workshop contributed greatly to the social workers’ self-esteem, their sense of personal development, and sense of professional development, and that it fostered a meaningful connection among the team members. Social workers who participated in the program reported an increase in their sense of personal and professional capability, a consolidation of trust and a sense of closeness among the team members, and feeling that they were beginning to appreciate themselves and the work they do.

**Target Population:**

Social workers in social services departments serving the Arab population. In the future, the program will be expanded to include social workers working in additional fields of occupation and professional frameworks.

**Goals:**

1. Reducing burnout among social workers.
2. Developing the native knowledge of the social services department team and the community through research, practice, and policy.
3. Advancement of social workers as professionals and researchers.

**Action Plan**

The AUSJ is a two-year program.

**First Year:**

1. Three Eagala workshops—each workshop will include working with horses and processing the experience with a team of social workers.
2. Building a personal, professional, and organizational vision—at the end of the Eagala workshops, the social workers will define and build their vision with the assistance of the program’s facilitators.
3. A qualitative research workshop aimed at revisiting the principles of qualitative research and encouraging the social workers to research social issues they come across in their work. In the first stage, the social workers will be divided into subgroups (up to four subgroups). Each group will research one field. The workshop will teach the social workers how to research and document their study findings in journals in the field of social work and present their research at relevant conferences.
4. A “Photo Voice” workshop—16 sessions, in which a task group jointly researches and documents a chosen topic related to the participants’ daily lives and involving an undesirable situation. (The topic itself will be chosen through a discussion with the participants). Each session will last three academic hours.\*
5. A one-day seminar at the end of the program in which the participants will present their research findings and activity.

**\* Adaptation of the program will be examined together with the department of social services.**

**Second Year:**

1. Connecting the social workers with researchers from the School of Social Work at Sapir College to advance joint research and academic publications.
2. Promoting unique intervention programs based on the native knowledge of the community in various fields such as youth, children, the elderly, and more.
3. An Eagala workshop each quarter with the participation of social workers in the department.

**Program Products**

1. The social workers’ participation in conferences.
2. The publication of academic studies based on the fields of research developed in the department.
3. The development of unique intervention programs based on the native knowledge identified.
4. A professional conference at the end of the program in which the findings of the joint research will be presented, along with the practice that has developed as part of the program.