

Social Services Kaimahi Hauora Stories:

Sacha's story*

Sasha's story shows how crucial it is for new graduates and kaimahi who are new to social services mahi to have strong support wrapped around them, so they can remain strong in their work alongside children, rangatahi and whānau.



I've been working with young people since I started social work training, and I worked as a youth worker before becoming a qualified social worker.

After I finished social work training at university, I was eager to develop my own sense of identity as a practitioner. I wanted to develop my confidence to trust my 'gut feeling' and be able to communicate what was guiding that 'gut feeling', as part of my decision-making process in my practice, alongside the evidence that was in front of me.

I started work as a Social Worker in Schools, and quickly realised that the qualification I got as a social worker was a piece of paper that allowed me to learn the practice and really get to know it. There were countless decisions that needed to be made, often weighing up safety concerns, and I was trying to figure out what my role was. So many questions went through my head as I was navigating this mahi. Questions like, 'Is it safe to disclose to the whānau I made a report of concern?' 'Is this part of my role? Or is this not part of my role, and if that's the case, who do I talk to who can meet this need?'

I would be sitting with these questions in a school environment where I was not surrounded by other social workers, and I wasn't in a workspace like an office where I could just turn around and ask someone. We were all out and about doing the important mahi to support tamariki and whānau. And sometimes it felt isolating to be a lone voice who was seeing the grey areas, where systems can be more black and white.

During this time, I was shadowing a more experienced social worker and she found out that a child had been sexually abused. Oranga Tamariki was notified and she had to tread carefully about her decisions as there were complex family dynamics to consider. This was a very confronting moment for me as a young worker in social services, and I kept thinking, 'this is what the reality of social work is like'. I felt under-prepared, as I had only written assignments about child care legislation and the basics

Sometimes it felt isolating to be a lone voice who was seeing the grey areas, where systems can be more black and white.



of recognising child abuse. Sure, there were discussions about self-care and the best advice was to know that you did enough. That the decisions you make as a new graduate are ones that you made with the information you had at that point. But it still felt awful to think that my mistakes would impact the wellbeing of a family. At that time, I really needed to just talk to someone but I struggled to do so.

It... felt awful to think that my mistakes would impact the wellbeing of a family. At that time, I really needed to just talk to someone but I struggled to do so.

After a few days we went to visit this child in the classroom and it was obvious he was struggling to pay attention. To know that 1 in 5 children in Aotearoa New Zealand are sexually abused and 80% of the time it is by someone they know was shocking to me. And as we continued this visit and in the days after, my own body literally started showed signs of shock as the enormity of the situation really took a hold. I was taking shorter breaths, my body was constantly tense and my heart would race. I kept asking myself, 'Is

this normal?' I would be having conversations with people, but it felt like I wasn't present. It felt like my sense of reality shattered and I clearly was not okay, but I would drag myself to work.

At this point I was having a few panic attacks a day and I still showed up for work, thinking to myself, 'I just need to push through this'. And it only made it worse. I knew I needed to advocate for myself, but it was so much easier to advocate for the needs of others. To admit that I was not okay and not in the space to be caring for others was very difficult. I was a new grad, and the thought of quitting this early in the game just didn't seem acceptable to me. Not only was I struggling with the realities of the work, there were things in my personal life that were also affecting my work. I needed someone to remind me that what I was experiencing was a human response, and to open the door for me to debrief and talk, and to find ways to be able to practice safely and feel like I was practising safely.

Looking back on my own experience, it highlights the need for each of us as social service workers to have a strong support system outside of the professional context. It also made me realise that being a social worker is not just about building up the communities we work in and with, but also to rely on them when needed. I could empathise with the families that were in our services because it is hard to ask for help, and to accept help.

I knew I needed to advocate for myself, but it was so much easier to advocate for the needs of others.

After much thought, I resigned from my role as a social worker in schools, because my tank was empty. I took a break from social work and it lasted longer than I expected. When I decided that I felt ready to jump back into social work, I would be asked why I was in my first role for only a couple of



months. It was very difficult explaining the myriad of factors that led to me resigning in a way where I did not feel shame. Looking back at my experience now, I can see that it was a human reaction to the inhumaneness some of our tamariki are experiencing. It was the first time I had to deal with vicarious trauma, witnessing the stories from people who were redefining the term resilience, just by keeping on keeping on, despite having experienced the deepest kinds of trauma. Even when there were people around me who could help, I struggled in silence, thinking this was not normal and blaming myself for not being able to be resilient.

Reflecting on my experiences now a few years later, I can see this kind of hyper-independence was preventing myself from asking for the help I needed.

Now I ask myself how I can make things easier, and give myself a break after those big conversations with families, or after holding space while sitting with someone and listening to them telling their story which often has grief, loss and trauma at the centre of it. I started to normalise discussing and debriefing with colleagues to be supported in the mahi I'm doing.

Through this process, I'm now more aware of the interaction between my own journey for healing and the clients who we work with.

I think the reality is, though, that we often forget to listen to our own needs when we are in a line of work that is dedicated to tending to the needs of others. The term 'self-care' has been repeated over and over, to the point it sounds like it is losing its meaning. I think focusing on hauora is an opportunity to re-think about what self-care means to us as a wider sector, and I mean thinking about that beyond things that we can do as individuals to help us get through the day. I think we are able to stay strong in our mahi when we tautoko one another and know that the work we do is valued. And practical things, that might seem little, but that can make a big difference. For example, we can check-in with a colleague who doesn't seem like their usual self over a cup of tea, or sit with them through tough feelings of helplessness when they are stuck feeling like they are constantly fighting against the system. Maybe when we go over informed consent with a client, we could also make it part of the process to share a compliment with them. I believe these small gestures added up altogether will build support networks where kāmahi have hope to stay strong in their mahi.



Reflecting on my own experience, and what I see around me, other practical things are needed to help social service kaimahi to thrive in their work. We need to address things like high caseloads. I think having a high caseload of clients to meet service user targets is a challenge for us as social services kaimahi, because it impacts the trust and relationships that needs to be formed to get stuck into the mahi. The expectation for people to fit into strict timeframes of service delivery is a concept I have struggled to accept. I won't always be able to develop trust in a set amount of time to complete an assessment. Sometimes when we plan an intervention along with the family, unexpected things will always happen. The only way I am able come to terms with this is to believe that I have done the best that I could in the given time. And to hope that there has been some progress made towards growth. Even if it meant all I did for the past six months was find out what not to do. That could be information useful for the next professional that the client invites into their own hauora and wellbeing journey.

It's also crucial that all social services workers have regular supervision to develop self-reflective practice, so you can feel confident in developing your own style as a practitioner. This supervision needs to be separate from line-management – either internally or externally. Having role clarity and a robust orientation programme for new staff is also crucial, in any social services setting. Because of the demands of the mahi, having generous annual leave entitlements, like five weeks annual leave in any organisation would make a big difference, and of course, having collegial support with trusted fellow kaimahi who you can bounce ideas off for decision-making is essential.

I've also come to recognise that – unfortunately – it's natural as a social services worker to experience feelings of helplessness when the systems we are navigating to remove barriers for whānau to support their wellbeing are the systems that are perpetuating them. That's not to say that is ok – but it's important to recognise this is the context we are working in.



**We've used a different name to protect the identity of this kaimahi who has bravely and kindly shared her story.*

Places to find support

Even though every day in our mahi as social services workers we're caring for and helping others, sometimes we need some help ourselves. If any time you're feeling distressed or need some immediate support, you can free text or call [1737](https://www.1737.org.nz) the National Telehealth Service to talk to or txt with a trained counsellor at any time.

For additional support if you need it at any time, you can get in touch with one of these organisations:

Lifeline – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Tāmaki Makaurau

Anxiety New Zealand – 0800 ANXIETY (0800 269 4389)

Suicide Crisis Helpline – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

Healthline – 0800 611 116

Rural Support Trust – 0800 787 254

Samaritans – 0800 726 666

For free counselling support for children and rangatahi, get in touch with:

0800 What's Up – 0800WHATSUP

[whatsup.co.nz](https://www.whatsup.co.nz)

YouthLine – 0800 376 633 / free txt 234

