STRESS LESS

Switching off

Kath Lockett discovers how workers who see human suffering every day keep smiling.

Those workers who specialise in helping sufferers of child abuse and mental illness see more than their fair share of distressing situations.

Dr Bernadette Saunders is a senior research fellow in child abuse prevention at Monash University. Her research has included examining risk assessment in child protection, child sexual abuse and the media and the intergenerational transfer of family violence.

"The research that I am involved in … can be stressful," she says. "A particular focus has been the physical punishment of children or 'smacking'. It can be difficult speaking to, and sometimes being confronted by, the media about this issue and reading public responses to suggestions that the defence to assault of 'reasonable chastisement' should be removed."

The subject matter is not the only part of her job that adds stress.

"Academic life comes with the pressure to attract research funding and publish in high-ranking journals and also means striving to achieve high standards in lecturing, research, publications and community involvement when there rarely seems to be enough time," she says.

Outside work, Saunders values time with her family and friends and keeping active. "My children and their educational and work experiences, their interests and achievements are very important to me and have helped me maintain balance in my life, as have extended family events and time on holiday with my husband and children – especially hiking in the Grampians. The flexibility to sometimes be able to work at home also helps."

Yoga and meditation sessions and gym workouts with a spa or steam also relieve stress. "I also love to read novels but only rarely manage to finish a good book," she says.

Spending 20 years in the public and private mental health systems hasn't lessened clinical psychologist Dr Simon Crisp's enthusiasm for the work but he knows the job has significant responsibilities.

"When treating adolescents, for example, you're frequently helping people decide not to end their life, hurt themselves or make dangerous life decisions," he says. "It's a very privileged position, to help others and be trusted with deeply personal information that people share."

Great escape … clinical psychologist Simon Crisp beats the stress of his job with bushwalks and photography. He also appreciates the support and advice of colleagues.

Early on, Crisp appreciated the compulsory clinical supervision; these days, as director of his own practice, Neo Psychology, he appreciates the support and advice of his colleagues. "They understand the unique stresses associated with clinical practice and support me to deal with the often-confronting matters and responsibilities I have.

"Being careful not to let your career and work life consume you is important, especially as a psychologist. This role is often a selfless one, so getting away into the outdoors, which I love, and having some time to myself is important. I am a passionate photographer, bushwalker and trail-bike tourer.

"I also love spending time with my family, especially wrestling and having adventures with my kids."

Having confidence in your skills and abilities in handling the rigours of the job should not be underestimated, he says. "Years of training and experience in clinical psychology mean it is easier to maintain a well-considered and effective response to challenging situations. Knowing that I am well-equipped and experienced to deal with these things substantially reduces the stress."

Scott Garnett is the leading teacher of community partnerships at Travancore, a school that supports students with diagnosed mental health issues.

"I find the number of students referred to our team stressful, and also the distress that I see in families and teachers who are trying to work with young people affected with behavioural and mental health issues," he says.

He is very clear about not taking on the client's problem, instead considering how he can help them.

Outside of work, Garnett catches up with friends and winds down by listening to music.

"I also enjoy collecting Australian automotive ephemera, usually old sales brochures. I love the colour and lies that they spout on what is basically a mundane form of transport."

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TIPS

- **Balance** "It is important to maintain a healthy balance between work and outside commitments," says Saunders.
- **Support** "Support from a skilled colleague is probably the single most valuable way to maintain high standards and safe practise," says Crisp.
- **Perspective** "Be clear about what you can do versus what is impossible," Garnett advises.

FIRST AND WORST

COLIN MCLAREN
This writer has a dusty work history.

MY FIRST JOB began at 16, renting a two-storey terrace with five blokes, five bongs and one very big stereo player. I got my first job at the taxation office. I lasted only 18 months. I was responsible for finding the taxation files of bankrupt businessmen or liquidated companies in a room with a million dusty corporate taxation files. Our only concession was our boss allowed us to have rock music playing on loudspeakers.

MY WORST JOB was when I was 19 and living in damp London, working as a rat catcher. I took a job with two much older Irishmen, clearing out cellars in old London town. Once clean, we'd sweep the dusty cellar bare and there would always be dozens of rats. The only thing that kept me going back each morning was the two Irishmen: they were the two funniest men I have met.

EFFIE MANN

Colin McLaren's latest book, *Sunflower: a Tale of Love, War and Intrigue*, is published by Victory Books and is out now.