

The Barefoot Helper

Mindfulness and Creativity
in Social Work and the
Caring Professions

Mark Hamer



Russell House Publishing

Russell House Publishing
First published in 2006 by:
Russell House Publishing Ltd.
4 St. George's House
Uplyme Road
Lyme Regis
Dorset DT7 3LS
Tel: 01297-443948
Fax: 01297-442722
e-mail: help@russellhouse.co.uk
www.russellhouse.co.uk

© Mark Hamer

The moral right of Mark Hamer to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with The Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright holder and the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-publication Data:

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-905541-03-4

Typeset by TW Typesetting, Plymouth, Devon
Printed by

About Russell House Publishing

Russell House Publishing aims to publish innovative and valuable materials to help managers, practitioners, trainers, educators and students.

Our full catalogue covers: social policy, working with young people, helping children and families, care of older people, social care, combating social exclusion, revitalising communities and working with offenders. Full details can be found at www.russellhouse.co.uk and we are pleased to send out information to you by post. Our contact details are on this page. We are always keen to receive feedback on publications and new ideas for future projects.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
<i>About the Author</i>	vi
<i>Who This Book is Aimed at</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	viii
Chapter 1 Where we Are: The State of Social Work	1
Chapter 2 Relationships	12
Chapter 3 Creating Change	23
Chapter 4 Your Self is the Best Tool That You Have	53
Conclusion	89
<i>References and Websites</i>	91
<i>Reviews of Preventing Breakdown by Mark Hamer</i>	96

For Daisy and Oscar, my children,
who have taught me more than they will ever know.
As I grow older, I begin to understand that the
child really is the father of the man.

Acknowledgements

Writing this little book has been like going into a fantastic grotto filled with jewels, gold and precious artefacts. I felt like Aladdin as I plundered and rummaged and carried away as much as my bulging pockets hold. There are many beautiful and inspiring ideas out there in the world. Ideas which explore humanity, which express the beauty and poetry of life. I have taken the words and ideas which caught my eye and which fitted in with what I wanted to say. I hope I have credited everybody whose words I have recycled.

This is a little book, it can only hold so much and I have had to be ruthless in my editing. There is much I would have liked to say, both in feeling and content. But I am confident that if I strike a chord with the reader, if I plant or nurture a seed, they will go much further with their exploration than I have been able to here.

I am eternally grateful to Geoffrey Mann at Russell House for his invaluable support and encouragement through the tough times which are part of the process of writing a book, and for his tireless efforts in helping me to knock it into a publishable shape from my stream of consciousness rambles. I am also grateful to Martin Calder who, although he may not be aware of it, has encouraged me very much in my writing, also to the readers who have taken the trouble to send me their thoughts about my other work.

About the Author

I am a practising social worker and therapist in the Option 2 Project in Cardiff. This is an award winning service that works with families in crisis. When childcare professionals are about to remove children from their families we become involved and help families to make real changes so they can remain together as families. We have trained practitioners from across the UK in our solution-focussed model and they are reporting some very positive outcomes. We concern ourselves with outcomes for families rather than input and so our trusting management style has created a place where real social work is valued. We use a model that has spectacular outcomes for families at the hard end of the child protection system. You can read more about it on my website www.another-way.co.uk and in my previous book *Preventing Breakdown* which is available from the same publisher.

This is a very different kind of book, a much more personal one. I hope you enjoy reading it and I would be delighted if you got in touch with me. No, really, I would enjoy hearing from you with your thoughts and comments. Writing is a lonely business and I still get excited when I get emails! John Stuart Mill said that every movement must experience three stages: ridicule, discussion and adoption and I expect responses to this book that will fit into each of Mills' categories, so please don't hold back! I like to think of this as an open source model, if you feel you can improve it, teach me how, and if I am lucky enough for this book to reach a second edition then I may be able to incorporate your ideas.

Who This Book is Aimed at

If you work with people – sick people, hurting, abused or abusing people, violent people, people without hope, failing people, drug misusing, drinking, worried or frightened people, the ideas in this book may help you. I believe they can help you to do your job better and can help you to stay sane and happy in a challenging role. I have written it mainly with social workers in mind because that is a world I know and understand. Yet this is a book primarily about working with people in distress and how you can do that in the most enabling way for them and for you. So if your role, in whatever setting, is to help people who are going through difficult times, if your role is to help people to change their lives, then this book is for you.

Introduction

Social work is a profession I care about, something I enjoy doing and that is valid in our world, but sometimes it is not all it could be. I think it can feel better for clients and better for workers more often than it does. I believe you can be happy as a social worker, loved by clients and colleagues, and a damn good social worker with a good reputation and good career prospects. Furthermore, I also believe you can be effective and professional and yet shrug off the dulling constraints of corporate uniformity and be your own unique, individual self. In fact I believe you have to access your own personal creativity in order to do good social work. There is a way of doing social work that celebrates the human spirit and embraces the creativity that defines human beings, a way that encourages clients to get to know who they really are and what they really want, a way that helps them to create clear goals based on their insights. I know that there is a way of working that will help you to feel good about what you do more often.

You may have already guessed that this is not your usual social work book. I don't talk here about published guidance, or messages from research. I will not be quoting any statistics, but there is a list of resources at the end of the book so readers can follow any particular threads they find appealing. This is a book about ideas and putting them into practice. They are ideas that I hope you will find useful, practical, thought-provoking and supportive.

Where are we heading?

Over the years I have seen social work practice become more bureaucratic, less humane and less connected to the daily lives of the people who use our services. Many social workers have become case managers, practicing by telephone and computer, tied up with client record systems and care plans, arranging other services to visit their clients for them. In

one area I am familiar with social workers, once based in the community, now work from an out of town call centre which provides the public with no access to their social worker. Nearly 100 workers practice on each of three floors. The workers themselves have no personal space, no sound barriers between them, there is no space for quiet reflection, no facility to make a quiet telephone call with a grieving client. They have no personal control over temperature, ventilation and noise levels, no doors to close, even no walls to put up pictures. When pictures are put up on the posh wooden filing cabinets they are removed by workers in the night. Environments like these are purposely designed to stifle creativity and create people who are easily managed, easily observed and will do as they are told. In such an environment, creativity feels threatening. When workers voice their rebellion, their words are wasted. Complaints are met with blank indifference.

Sometimes the systems we work within can breed a sense of hopelessness, taking excitement and creativity away from workers. If our role is to help people to be free of the shackles of destructive behaviour patterns, self-defeating thought processes, poor skills in parenting, self-care, relationships and communication and if we are to help people to create new lives, then we as workers need to feel creative, need to feel free to do work that is personal and individual to the clients unique needs.

Changing your life is a creative process that comes from the imagination and so clients need to be able to be creative. If our own creativity is stifled, then it becomes difficult to foster the creativity in others that encourages them to pursue the kinds of lives they hope to have. If, however, our role is to monitor, to control, to measure, to oppress, then we are well on the way to achieving that aim.

A quiet shift in values

Around me, in my daily life, I can see a quiet shift in personal values. Individuals around me are thinking about how we choose to make a living, what we choose to eat, how we spend our free time, what we do with our leisure time, what we believe about life and our place in the world, how we make ourselves fit and healthy and how we look after our planet.

The Slow Food movement in Italy, based on cooking real food at home for family and friends, has expanded to become the Slow City movement,

where traffic is reduced and fast food outlets are restricted. My own employers are making efforts to concern themselves with the work/life balance of their employees, conscious that happy people are productive people. They are bringing masseurs into the workplace, promoting lunchtime walks and running yoga classes.

Many people are becoming concerned about pollutants in our atmosphere, their CO₂ footprint and the freshness of the food they eat. They are changing their diets to exclude foods treated with chemicals, genetically engineered or that have travelled long and polluting distances. We are focussing on the ethics of what we choose to eat. City dwellers are buying fresh, organic and locally produced food from farmer's markets which come to town, on Sundays, supporting local growers, developing local communities and traders and helping individuals to live a life that does the least harm. People are making changes and trying to create lives which are more ethical, more balanced between work and play, love and life, lives which are physically, spiritually and emotionally healthy for themselves and others. All of these actions, this sense of mindfulness, spring from beliefs about individual responsibility and love.

This is a grass roots movement in which people are transforming society not by political or social action, but by quietly making choices about their own lives, thinking about their beliefs and activities and changing them for the better. It is a movement of individual souls, with no leader, no clear organisation or structure and practically invisible, yet when you start to look you will find evidence for it. A Sunday magazine has a regular barefoot columnist; a clothing company in West Wales has an article in its catalogue about what makes a decent loaf of bread. My favourite website at the moment is Freecycle. Instead of taking unwanted furniture, bicycles, cardboard boxes etc. to the dump, or trying to sell them on Ebay, people offer them to other members of the community for free. This reduces landfill and transport; builds community links, declutters lives and at the same time provides free things to people who can make use of them.

Workers are looking for ways to integrate their values into their work, looking for meaning and joy in their occupations, downsizing, downshifting and focussing on the quality of life instead of the collection of money and the display of prestige. People are feeling the need to slow down and look after themselves, looking to holistic solutions to life's difficulties.

Like the eternal Yin Yang symbol, darkness carries the seed of light, and so out of the self-obsessed attitudes of the 'Me generation' inevitably

comes the socially responsible 'We generation' of ethical traders and consumers. People who take the time and energy to question their place in this world, their work, their actions, how they spend their time on this planet and how they can comfortably share space with the variety of other human souls around them and value their often very different ways of expression.

Such questions produce people-oriented individuals who embrace their individual creativity and consider how it can be used to make the world a better place, who consider every action and thought and try to add something positive and create a better life for everybody. And so individuals are developing their personal creativity and generally thinking about how their individual presence in the world can do the least harm and generally be a force for good.

A synthesis of ideas

Over thousands of years, people have been just people, living their lives and trying to make the best of things. Over the years they have learned stuff about how to live. Some people have dedicated their studies to the problems of being people, we can still use some of the stuff they have learned. In the past those people would have been shamans, then mystics, philosophers and priests, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and counsellors. Many have learned truths about the human condition, and I make no apologies that I have drawn my inspiration for this book from a combination of sources; from Taoism, Yoga and Hindu philosophy, Christian mysticism and occult thought, Zen Buddhism and more recent thinking about brief solution-focussed therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing, neuro-linguistic programming and life coaching.

Time and time again in my reading, these often vastly different world views have hit me with the same themes, that happiness comes from:

- doing the least harm
- focused effort
- clarity of thought
- respect
- awareness

- clear goals
- taking time not just to act and do things, but also stopping doing things from time to time, and experiencing life directly.

This synthesis of ideas is the essence of barefoot philosophy.

How social workers can do the least harm

In this book I want to explore how helpers can do the least harm. This is a practice I aspire to as a social worker and a human being. I am concerned with how we treat ourselves, our colleagues, our clients and our environment. I believe that work should be liberating, meaningful and fulfilling for workers and clients. This is a creative approach that creates positive outcomes for workers, clients and even the systems we work within.

This thoughtfulness about living a life that does the least harm easily migrates into ideas about how human and professional relationships can do the least harm. How can we work as professionals with vulnerable clients and do the least harm to ourselves, to our colleagues, to the individuals we support? If workers are to create progress in the gentlest and most holistic way possible while doing the least harm, this philosophy needs to be embodied equally by managers and teams.

To do the least harm while promoting change, you have to be aware of where change occurs naturally, so that you can encourage and empower that change. This allows the client to grow in their own direction at their own pace. The social worker's role is to value, feed and nurture the client's growth. It allows you to experience the very life of spontaneous engagement with another human being, experience the full joy of living and being and doing good social work . . . no, more than that, this is a philosophy that will inspire you to do *fantastic* social work.

Social work as a positive force in the world

I also write this in a spirit of celebration, as a reminder that we are a positive force in the world, that we are creative human beings. It is a book about love in action, about joy and beauty, about caring, about the heart and soul of who we are and what we do. Having said that, I hope you find this an intensely practical and useful book that helps you think about how you do your thing.

If you go barefoot you tread lightly and carefully, living in and fully experiencing the moment. If you think of going barefoot as a metaphor for a way of living, then you will see that the idea quickly becomes very deep and considers issues such as sharing, communication and love. This is a holistic way of living and, as a social worker, it feels only right that I should use those beliefs in my work with clients. They want to feel whole too:

Going barefoot is the gentlest way of walking and can symbolise a way of living – being authentic, vulnerable, sensitive to our surroundings. It's the feeling of enjoying warm sand beneath our toes, or carefully making our way over sharp rocks in the darkness. It's a way of living that has the lightest impact, removing the barrier between us and nature.

Adele Coombs, *Barefoot Dreaming*