

Secondary Traumatic Stress: Strategies For Helping Professionals

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Stress and Trauma

- ❑ Working with people in crisis causes ongoing exposure to stress and traumatic stress
- ❑ Reactions to stress and trauma are normal
- ❑ They must be addressed regularly
- ❑ Failure to address them as a part of our work can cause secondary trauma

Emotional Exhaustion, Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

- ❑ **Emotional Exhaustion:** Chronic state of physical and emotional depletion that results from excessive demands and continuous stress.
- ❑ **Compassion Fatigue:** Gradual lessening of compassion over time.
- ❑ **Burnout:** Long term exhaustion and diminished interest in work. Feeling overwhelmed by chronicity and complexity of problems in a working environment

Emotional Exhaustion, Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

- ❑ All are components of Vicarious Trauma
- ❑ “Life-management” problems that do not represent a “disorder”

What is Secondary Traumatic Exposure?

- Exposure to traumatic material when working with traumatized individuals
- Exposures range from a single episode to frequent and high intensity
- Traumatic situations are not a direct threat to helpers themselves
- Exposure are common among:
 - Trauma counselor
 - Rescue workers
 - Humanitarian/crisis intervention workers

Secondary Trauma Exposure Reactions

- ▣ Range from stressful to full blown traumatic reactions
- ▣ Could be both short and long term

Traumatic Reactions

- Also known as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD
- Severity of reactions is greater
- Symptoms are present for one month or longer and persist when stressful event is no longer present

PTSD Symptoms

- Intrusive Symptoms:
 - Obsessive recollections
 - Dreams/nightmares
 - Flashbacks
 - Physiological reactions
 - Psychological distress
- Avoidant Reactions:
 - thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations that bring up memories of the traumatic event
 - people, places, conversations, activities, objects, or situations that bring up memories of the traumatic event

PTSD Symptoms

- Hyper-arousal
 - Irritability and aggressive behavior
 - Impulsive or self-destructive behavior
 - Hypervigilance
 - Exaggerated startle
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Problems with sleep

PTSD Symptoms

- Negative Changes in Thought/Mood
 - The inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event
 - Persistent and elevated negative evaluations about one's self, others, or the world (for example, "I am unlovable," or "The world is an evil place")
 - Elevated self-blame or blame of others about the cause or consequence of a traumatic event
 - A negative emotional state (for example, shame, anger, fear) that is pervasive
 - Loss of interest in activities that one used to enjoy
 - Feeling detached from others
 - The inability to experience positive emotions (for example, happiness, love, joy)

Vicarious Trauma

- ▣ The inner transformation that occurs in the inner experience of the professional that comes about as a result of empathic engagement with the victim's trauma
- ▣ Cumulative in nature
- ▣ May parallel those symptoms experienced by the traumatized victims
- ▣ More common among those who work with traumatized population

Vicarious Trauma

- ▣ Feeling helpless/hopeless regarding taking care of self or others
- ▣ Disillusionment about concepts of justice and freedom
- ▣ Change in beliefs (e.g. cognitive schema)
 - Self
 - Others World
- ▣ Mood disturbance (e.g. anxiety, depression)

Vicarious Trauma

- ▣ Depersonalization
- ▣ Feeling of reduced personal accomplishment
- ▣ Increased feelings of cynicism, sadness, or seriousness
- ▣ Increased sensitivity towards violence
- ▣ Distrustful and alienation
- ▣ Alcohol and drug abuse

Vicarious Trauma

- ▣ The Impact on your work with clients:
 - Compromising boundaries with victims
 - Anger towards clients
 - Doubts in professional skills of self and other
 - Loss of focus on client's strengths
 - Avoidance of discussing trauma with clients
 - Intrusiveness when discussing trauma with clients
 - Reversal of roles

Stress Vs. Vicarious Trauma

STRESS	VICARIOUS TRAUMA
Characterized by over-engagement	Characterized by disengagement
Emotions are over-reactive	Emotions are blunted
Produces urgency and hyperactivity	Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Loss of energy	Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope
Leads to anxiety disorders	Leads to detachment and depression
Primary damage is physical	Primary damage is emotional
May kill you prematurely	May make life seem not worth living
Source: Helpguide.org	

How Do You Know If You Are On The Road to Vicarious Trauma?

- ❑ *Every* day is a bad day
- ❑ Caring about your work or life seems like a waste of energy
- ❑ You're exhausted all the time
- ❑ You find the tasks involved in your work mind-numbingly dull or overwhelming
- ❑ You feel like nothing you do makes a difference

Effective Coping

- The 3 “R” Approach:
 - **RECOGNIZE:** Watch for the warning signs
 - **REVERSE:** Undo the damage by managing stress and seeking support
 - **RESILIENCE:** Build your resilience to stress by taking care of your physical and emotional health

Prevention Tips

- Start the day with a relaxing ritual such as meditation, stretching, journaling, or reading.
- Adopt healthy eating, sleeping, and exercising habits.
- Learn how to say “no” and avoid over-extending yourself.
- Take DAILY breaks.
- Nourish your creative side.

Recovery Tips

- ▣ Slow down!
- ▣ Get Support
- ▣ Re-evaluate your goals and priorities

Grieve Your Losses

- ▣ Loss of Idealism
- ▣ Loss of the role or identity
- ▣ Loss of physical and emotional energy
- ▣ Loss of friends, fun, and sense of community
- ▣ Loss of esteem, self-worth, and sense of control and mastery
- ▣ Loss of joy, meaning and purpose that make work – and life – worthwhile

Source: Keeping the Fire from Burnout to Balance, by R. Luban



Part III: Historical Trauma

What is Historical Trauma?

- ▣ “Cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations emanating from massive group trauma”
- ▣ Resulting from over 500 years of physical, emotional, social, and spiritual genocide.
 - Relocation
 - Assimilation
 - Boarding school
 - Cultural and language suppression

Historical Trauma Reactions

- ▣ Unsettled emotional trauma
- ▣ Depression
- ▣ High mortality rates
- ▣ High rates of alcoholism
- ▣ Significant problems of child abuse and domestic violence

Recovering From Historical

- ❑ Repair connections with others, self-image, values and beliefs.
- ❑ Individual counseling, spiritual help, and group or entire community gatherings are all important aspects of the healing process.
- ❑ Interventions aims to renew hope, positive self-image, spiritual beliefs, family connections, and reaffirming one's place in the human community.

Recovering From Historical Trauma

- ❑ Particular attention is given to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty
- ❑ Interventions promote social justice and social change
- ❑ Interventions integrate cultural history and values with the contemporary reality of clients.