INTERPRETING IS A HIGH STRESS PROFESSION

The results of this extensive study placed interpretation in the category of high-stress professions.
Consequences: Burnout, Vicarious Trauma. Stress can pose an impediment to our performance.

Source: AIIC Workload Study Executive Summary (2001)

UNIQUE TRIGGERS OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA IN INTERPRETERS

Multiple studies* of job-related stress for sign language and spoken language interpreters working in various settings:
- Refugee and asylum seeker services
- Mental health & therapy
- Community/public services
- Trauma & violent crime survivors care
- Healthcare & clinical settings
- Legal investigations & courtroom proceedings

*Multiple resources (please see References and Resources)
COMMONLY IDENTIFIED CAUSES OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND JOB-RELATED STRESS IN LANGUAGE PROFESSIONALS:

- Linguistic & paralinguistic aspects
- Cultural, moral & ethical mediation
- Confidentiality vs. need to debrief
- Isolation & lack of supervision
- Utilitarian view of interpreter role

The phenomenon generally associated with the "cost of caring".

Also referred to as:
- Compassion fatigue
- Secondary traumatic stress
- Secondary victimization

State of tension and preoccupation with trauma experiences/stories.

VT affects professionals through changes in their beliefs about themselves, their world, their faith, and their psychological functioning.

Sources: "Vicarious Trauma. Fact Sheet #9" by the American Counseling Association (2011) and "Effects of Client Trauma on Interpreters" by Mailee Lor (2012)

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

- Impacts interpreter performance
- Increases turnover
- Affects customer experience & customer satisfaction
- Impacts the bottom line and retention

Human factor:
- Relationships
- Morale
The Stages of Burnout have been identified as:

1. Bureaucracy
2. Dehumanization
3. Enthusiasm
4. Apathy

Sources:

Apathy
1. Frustration
1. Stagnation
1. Enthusiasm

Biological, psychological, and social exhaustion and dysfunction
Feeling like “I have nothing left to give”

A cumulative combined effect of Burnout and Vicarious Trauma:

COMPASSION FATIGUE

Sources:

HOW DO WE PROCESS INFORMATION?

We filter information differently using:
- Deletion
- Distortion
- Generalization

Based on:
- Meta programs (unconscious filters)
- Values
- Beliefs
- Attitudes
- Memories
- Past decisions

HOW DO INTERPRETERS PROCESS INFORMATION?

“Interpreting is more than just transposing one language to another … it is throwing a semantic bridge between two people from different cultures and thought worlds.”

Source: “Reflections on the training of professionals: a metalinguistic approach” by Claude Namy (1977)

HOW DO INTERPRETERS PROCESS INFORMATION?

Interpreters seem to experience vicarious trauma differently than other professionals providing aid since they do more than witness the trauma; they channel it.

Vicarious trauma leaves an emotional residue of exposure to clients’ distress, their pain, fear, emotional turmoil.

Countertransference and shared trauma: unconscious redirection of the client’s feelings upon oneself.

Source: “Vicarious Trauma and the Professional Interpreter” in Psychology Today (August 2, 2013)

HOW DO INTERPRETERS PROCESS INFORMATION?

Interpreters are often left with the burden, and power, of choosing whether their translation should (or shouldn’t) convey the covert concepts or euphemisms directly. In many settings interpreters are forced to navigate imbalances of power and control.

There is nothing more we can do for you; we’re going to make you as comfortable as possible.

INTERPRETER IMPARTIALITY

IMIA Guide on Medical Interpreter Ethical Conduct:
Impartiality: “To remain impartial, interpreters should not share personal opinions or allow personal beliefs and relationships to affect communication. Impartiality, or professional distance, does not imply lack of concern for patients and assignments but speaks to the integrity of the profession and the process.”

Benefits of Impartiality for Interpreter:
- Impartiality makes us better interpreters
- It helps us avoid burnout
- It promotes longevity & well-being

Benefits of Impartiality for LEP, Provider:
- Message is delivered more accurately
- Interpreter is a part of an interdisciplinary team promoting effective communication

INTERPRETERS AS “TOOLS”

A study revealed that 30% of interpreters’ emotional difficulties were linked to dealing with service providers:
- Lack of understanding of interpreter role
- Lack of respect for the profession
- Viewed as “machines”, “conduits” or “common consumables”
- Feeling dehumanized

PROFESSIONALISM AND STRESS:

Interpreters are human: Remaining professional & impartial may leave us feeling guilty.

This guilt may have cultural causes or implications.

These feelings of guilt or powerlessness add to job-related stress and must be mitigated.

Source: “Interpreters’ Experiences of Transference/Dynamics, Vicarious Traumatization, and Their Need for Support and Supervision: A Systematic Literature Review” 2016 by Emma Darroch & Raymond Dempsey
SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Studies about interpreters revealed:

- **36%** emotionally impacted by their work
- **67%** couldn’t stop thinking about their clients’ troubles – 56% up to half an hour after sessions and 23% from several hours up to days after sessions
- **33%** stated that work had an impact on their personal lives
- **28%** reported difficulties in taking other assignments; described feeling weary, distracted and emotionally turmoil

(source: “Interpreters’ Experiences of Transferential Dynamics, Vicarious Traumatisation, and Their Need for Support and Supervision: A Systematic Literature Review” (2016) by Emma Darroch & Raymond Dempsey)

CASE STUDIES

“I also have a lot of cases that [when] I go home, I feel pretty sad about... You know, the voice needs to be heard... But sometimes I also kind of take it a little bit personally. I mean it’s hard to program yourself like a rock, a stone face in a courtroom and not worry about [it].”

(source: “Whose Trauma Is It? Vicarious Trauma and Its Impact on Court Interpreters” Sonali Rana, Purvi Shah, Kajori Chaudhuri. Proteus: Newsletter of NAJIT. Winter 2009 - 2010 Volume XVIII, No. 4)

“I can walk away from it, but I can’t to some extent [be]cause I’ve got that knowledge.”

“If something bad happens... I think I internalize it a little bit too much, I’ve not yet developed that strategy that I can just cut off from it.”

"It's not that I am feeling sorry for them and empathize with them, it's that I am becoming them." 

"I have to become that person, so everything what she or he says to me, I have to say it, and you know, we're only humans, you can't sort of completely switch yourself off or detach from emotions and when people sometimes say things like 'oh my life is not worth living', 'I don't want to live no more', \ldots\) saying things like that, I find it quite difficult because it doesn't agree with me..." 

Sources:

### CASE STUDIES

1. Raise awareness
2. Develop wellness programs
3. Set up mentor programs

Provide practical tools to prevent and mitigate stress:
- Pre-session
- In-session
- Post-session

### HOW CAN WE SUPPORT LANGUAGE PROFESSIONALS?

### BEFORE | DURING | AFTER

What do we do

BEFORE | DURING | AFTER 

the session?
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**MINIMIZE TASK RELATED STRESS**

**Be prepared**
- Know where you are going
- Pen/paper for note-taking
- Clarify any questions/instructions
- Dress code

**Be on time (or early)**
"5 Minutes Early Is On Time; On Time Is Late; Late Is Unacceptable"

**Eliminate distractions**
- Silence and put away your phone

**GET IN THE ZONE**

**Develop a ritual**
- (ex, hand washing)

**Mental grounding**
- (ex, "I am not my emotions")

Remind yourself to only focus on the task at hand.

**PRE-SESSION BRIEFING**

**Essential tools to**:
- Clarify roles
- Understand the context
- Define purpose
- Discuss strategy with the provider
- Set the tone for the session

78% of interpreters report not being briefed prior to sessions as particularly difficult

Sometimes we find ourselves feeling overwhelmed or overcome by feelings. This can affect how we perform. Ignoring our emotions will not help us mitigate their impact. To begin to diffuse a negative emotion, the first step is to take a moment to recognize what we are feeling and give it a name.

“Simply recognizing and naming an emotion quiets its effect, making thoughtful management of subsequent behavior more likely.”

“When Labeling an Emotion Quiets It” – Dan Travers, 2011

Second, inconspicuously shift your focus from the epicenter of stress using one of these techniques:

• Taking notes
• Rub your hands
• Focus on moving the big toe
• Move your feet
Third, we can take a step back to assess the encounter or scenario that caused us to feel this emotion. By seeing a bigger picture that involves not only our own reaction or perception of reality but that of others involved and even the perspective of a neutral or objective observer, we gain clarity.

**DURING - STEP 2: DISTANCE YOURSELF FROM THE EMOTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Own Reality</th>
<th>2nd Position</th>
<th>3rd Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You are fully associated into the problem or situation</td>
<td>You are now one step removed from the situation</td>
<td>You are now two step removed from the situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Think of re-setting and hitting “refresh” on your thoughts. Move forward deliberately and thoughtfully while leaving the emotion and associated stress behind.

**DURING - STEP 4: RESET**

- Take deep breaths
- Stand straight
- Look up
- Mental grounding: “I am not my emotions”
- Reset and refocus: come back to neutral

Research shows that:
- 46.9% of the time our mind is somewhere else
- Focus only on the task at hand
- Be in the *here and now*  

(“A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind” Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert, Harvard University, 2011)

**STEP 5: BE PRESENT**

Where are you?

Research shows that:
- 46.9% of the time our mind is somewhere else
- Focus only on the task at hand
- Be in the *here and now*
What do we do

BEFORE | DURING | AFTER

the session?

What about HIPAA, Confidentiality and Ethics?
Understanding the law, the tenet of Confidentiality and the information that we must protect allows us to effectively and ethically unload our emotional burdens (sharing our experience without disclosing individually identifiable health information protected by HIPAA, etc.)

AFTER:

HAVE A DEBRIEF PARTNER
Tap into potential sources of support in your professional network.
Avoid professional isolation!
Debrief Partners:
Are not there to make you feel better, they LISTEN.
A Debrief Partner does not:
• Say "I understand..."
• Claim to relate
• Offer advice

Just listen...

WHAT ABOUT HIPAA, Confidentiality and Ethics?
Understanding the law, the tenet of Confidentiality and the information that we must protect allows us to effectively and ethically unload our emotional burdens (sharing our experience without disclosing individually identifiable health information protected by HIPAA, etc.)

AFTER:

HAVE A DEBRIEF PARTNER
**CREATE A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT**

- Allow the language professional to time to heal and rest
- Be open to hearing that a language professional needs to accept a different type of assignment
- Keep an open mind and an open heart

This will lead to better outcomes (reduce turnover, improved quality of interpreting and customer service)

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**HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES**

**Cognitive**
- Write things down
- Review previous successes

**Behavioral**
- Do activities that you enjoy

**Physical**
- Aerobic exercise
- Routine sleep patterns
- Eat well-balanced meals & drink water
- Take mini-breaks

**Emotional**
- Name the emotion
- Give yourself permission to ask for help

**Spiritual**
- Meditation and/or prayer
- Find spiritual support

**Interpersonal**
- Talk with a debrief partner
- Take time to enjoy the company of trusted friends

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**WAYS TO ASSESS**

- [http://proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL_5_English.pdf](http://proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL_5_English.pdf)
  Professional Quality of Life Scale (free resource)
- [https://www.naada.org/assets/2416/sharon_foley_acc_militaryculturehub2.pdf](https://www.naada.org/assets/2416/sharon_foley_acc_militaryculturehub2.pdf)
  Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (free resource)
  Trauma and Attachment Belief Scale (available for purchase through WPS Publishing*)

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“Excellent self-care and excellent service are inextricably linked. Take care of yourself, so you can take care of business.”

~Julie Alexander, Core Health Partners, PLLC