COMPASSION FATIGUE: ADDITIONAL RISKS WHILE SERVING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS DURING A CRISIS

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OBJECTIVES

- Recognize the ways that serving vulnerable populations experiencing crisis can increase risk factors for compassion fatigue.
- Increase awareness of how to assess the impact of compassion fatigue at both the individual and organizational level.
- Identify strategies to reduce organizational risk factors and enhance personal and systemic resilience.
What brought you to this work?
What messages do you tell yourself or have you heard about what it means to do this kind of work?

WHY ARE WE HERE?
“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

- Dr. Rachel Remen
TERMINOLOGY

- Stress
- Traumatic stress
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Burnout
- Emotional labor
- Compassion fatigue
- Vicarious trauma
STRESS

STRESS CURVE

PERFORMANCE

too little stress (underload)  optimum stress  too much stress (overload)

fatigue  exhaustion  anxiety/panic/anger  breakdown

inactive  laid back

STRESS LEVEL
WHAT CAUSES STRESS TO BE MORE IMPACTFUL?

- **Duration**
  - The work is never done
  - In human services, may feel like we’re working against systems

- **Uncertainty**
  - To what degree can you predict what will happen today?
  - Uncertainty about basic safety of others

- **Importance**
  - What is the potential impact of your work?
  - For us, our work affects human lives
  - The people we serve become very important to us, and their stressors are important to us as well
CUMULATIVE STRESS
STAGES OF BURNOUT

Exhaustion – common in many workplaces

Guilt/shame – more amplified in human services; high stakes work

Cynicism/callousness – hardness, lack of empathy/compassion

Crisis – health, relationships, functioning

4 Stages of Burnout
VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- The emotional residue of exposure that counselors have from working with people as they are hearing their trauma stories and become witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured.
  - Impact of exposure to traumatic disclosures.

- Different from burnout
  - Vicarious trauma can occur at any time, or in one session
  - Burnout is a risk factor for vicarious trauma and vice versa

https://www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf
Work Related Trauma Exposure = Vicarious Trauma

Change in World View

Spectrum of Responses

Negative
- Vicarious Traumatization
- Secondary Traumatic Stress
- Compassion Fatigue

Neutral
- Impact Managed Effectively

Positive
- Vicarious Resilience
- Vicarious Transformation
- Compassion Satisfaction
“…the transformation or change in a helper’s inner experience as a result of responsibility for and empathic engagement with traumatized clients.”
(Saakvitne et al. 2000)
“Evaluating our response to trauma exposure is critical, because how we are impacted by our work in the present directly affects our work in the future.”

(van Dernoot, Lipsky & Burk, 2009)
SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

- Re-experiencing
  - Memories, intrusive thoughts; dreams, nightmares
- Avoidance
  - Efforts to avoid/disconnect from thoughts and feelings; diminished interest in activities; detachment and isolation from others; dissociation/depersonalization
- Negative change in mood and thoughts
  - Exaggerated negative beliefs about self/others; feelings of guilt/shame
- Change in arousal and reactivity
  - Hypervigilance; irritability, aggressive outbursts; exaggerated startle response; difficulty concentrating
A TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSE

(van Dernoot Lipsky and Burk, 2009)
ORGANIZATIONAL SYMPTOMS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE

- High absenteeism
- Constant changes in co-workers relationships
- Inability for teams to work well together
- Staff challenges organizational rules and regulations
- Aggressive behaviors among staff
- Inability of staff to complete assignments and tasks
- Inability of staff to respect and meet deadlines
- Lack of flexibility among staff members
- Strong reluctance to change
- Inability of staff to trust that improvement is possible
- Lack of vision for the future

https://www.compassionfatigue.org/organizations.html; Vicarious Trauma Toolkit; Adapted from J. Yassen in Figley, 1995
RECOGNIZING YOUR OWN SIGNS

- Identify your own signs of trauma exposure:
  - Thoughts
  - Feelings
  - Behaviors
  - Self-talk
  - Relationships

- What are you most likely to notice?
- What might others observe?
- What are you least likely to notice?
ONGOING ASSESSMENT

- Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL)
- Vicarious Trauma-Organizational Readiness Guide (VT-ORG) for Victim Services
  - Leadership and mission
  - Management and supervision
  - Employee empowerment and work environment
  - Training and professional development
  - Staff health and wellness
DURING THE BEST OF TIMES...

...the work is challenging and rewarding.
DURING A GLOBAL CRISIS

- Widespread illness and death
- Unemployment and financial instability
- Mental health concerns
- Social isolation
- Conflict of consciousness
THE NEW WORKPLACE

- Dramatic changes to “business as usual” with little notice
- Transition to teletherapy
- Concerns about the health and well-being of individuals served
- Loss of separation between work and home
- All the unknowns
WHAT’S THE IMPACT?

- People are exhausted
- Reduced access to work-based supports
- Restrictions on self-care activities and resources
- Workplaces are organized around safety, not values
DEVELOPING STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING COMPASSION FATIGUE

- Personal
  - Self-care
  - Identity outside of work

- Professional
  - Peer support
  - Growth mindset
  - Building a network of resources

- Organizational
  - Quality supervision
  - Professional development
  - Policies and procedures

- Community
  - Trauma-informed systems
  - Access to resources
A Daily Practice of Centering Myself

Why Am I Doing What I’m Doing?
Is Trauma Mastery a Factor for Me?
Is This Working for Me?

Engaging with Our Lives Outside of Work
Moving Energy Through Gratitude

Creating a Microculture
Practicing Compassion for Myself and Others
What Can I Do for Large-Scale Systemic Change?

Where Am I Putting My Focus?
What Is My Plan B?

Finding Balance

Building Compassion and Community

(van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009)
SELF CARE LOOKS LIKE...
SELF-CARE ISN’T EVERYTHING...

- Vicarious trauma is an occupational challenge for those working with trauma survivors.

- Organizations have an ethical mandate of a “duty to train,” wherein workers are taught about the potential negative effects of the work and how to cope.

_Vicarious Trauma Toolkit; Munroe, J. F., in Figley, Compassion Fatigue, 1995_
Vicarious trauma (VT) is an occupational challenge for the fields of victim services, emergency medical services, fire services, law enforcement, and others. Working with victims of violence and trauma has been shown to change the worldview of responders and can also put individuals and organizations at risk for a range of negative consequences.

A vicarious trauma-informed organization recognizes these challenges and assumes the responsibility for proactively addressing the impact of vicarious trauma through policies, procedures, practices, and programs.
VICARIOUS TRAUMA-INFORMED ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

- Leadership and Mission
  - Effective leadership, clarity, and alignment with mission
- Management and Supervision
  - Clear, respectful, quality, inclusive of VT
- Employee Empowerment and Work Environment
  - Promotes peer support, team effectiveness
- Training and Professional Development
  - Adequate, ongoing, inclusive of VT
- Staff Health and Wellness
  - Devotes priority and resources to sustaining practices
Be present, literally

Assess your own level of compassion fatigue

Check in with staff, providing a “holding” space

Follow through!
“Clients and patients will not stop needing help and support. Disasters will continue to arise. Children will get sick; trauma will occur. Helping professionals need to continue to explore ways to remain healthy while doing this deeply challenging and rewarding work.” (Mathieu, 2012)
VICARIOUS RESILIENCE

Involves the process of learning about overcoming adversity from the trauma survivor and the resulting positive transformation and empowerment through their empathy and interaction.

(Hernandez, Gangsei, and Engstrom, 2007)
FIVE STEPS TO RESILIENCE

1. Developing Self-Awareness
2. Maintaining Hope
3. Practicing Healthy Coping
4. Creating Strong Relationships
5. Remembering the Big Picture
IMPACT OF VICARIOUS RESILIENCE

- Greater perspective and appreciation of own circumstances
- More optimistic, motivated, efficacious, and reenergized
- Increased sense of hope, understanding, and belief in the possibility of recovery from trauma and other serious challenges
- Profound sense of commitment to, and finding meaning from the work

THE POSITIVE IMPACT

- Compassion Satisfaction
  - Pleasure derived from work
  - Pride in the sense of purpose and contribution of work

- Vicarious Transformation
  - Ongoing, intentional process
  - Brings deepened sense of connection with others
  - Increases gratitude, sense of meaning and hope
Knowing the risks of this work, what keeps you in it?

When you experience the harms of this work, what will you do?

What is ONE practice you will implement in order to manage the effects of this work?

What is the MOST important thing you want to remember from today?
Thank You

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REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


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- Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project: [https://www.compassionfatigue.org](https://www.compassionfatigue.org)

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- Trauma Informed Lens Podcast, Episode 77: Stress, burnout, and traumas: Why helping organizations are unique: https://connectingparadigms.org/podcast/episode-77-stress-burnout-traumas-why-helping-organizations-are-unique/
REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


- Vicarious Trauma Toolkit. Office for Victims of Crime; Office of Justice Program; US Department of Justice. [https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/](https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/)

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


- Unless otherwise noted, all images used in this presentation were provided courtesy of https://pixabay.com/