1. The Arriving Exercise

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

Trauma-Responsive Skills for Lawyers During COVID-19

Cynthia Bowkley, J.D., CPPM, SEP  
www.cynthiabowkley.com  
602-750-5038  
info@cynthiabowkley.com

Rebecca Stahl, J.D., LLM, SEP  
925-202-5441  
rmstahl@gmail.com

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

1. The Arriving Exercise

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl
What are we talking about?

- Toxic Stress/Distress
- Regulation vs. Dysregulation
- Trauma
- Trauma informed / Trauma responsive
  - Trauma informed means understanding what trauma is and how it affects you and your clients and everyone else in the system
  - Trauma responsive means doing something about that

The spectrum of experiences

- Emergency – need a first responder
- Harm to self/others – need an emergency response mental health team
- Crisis – When someone is entirely dysregulated but not a threat to self or others
- Dysregulation – what we deal with every day
Trauma Definitions

- Dictionary definition
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5 definition
- Broader definitions
  - Trauma is in the nervous system
  - Loss of connection
  - Loss of wholeness
- “Too much, too fast, too soon.”
- “Anything that overwhelms our capacity to cope or respond and leaves us feeling helpless, hopeless and/or out of control” – Hala Khouri

Types of Trauma

- Shock/acute trauma: an event that happened too fast and too soon, and overwhelms our capacity to cope and respond
- Developmental trauma due to an ongoing misattunement between a child and the primary caretaker.
- Chronic trauma: repetitive and occurs over a long period of time (e.g. abuse/neglect)
- Complex trauma: Multiple traumatic experiences without the time to heal between them.
- Systemic/institutional trauma: racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, oppression, etc.
- Pandemics

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl
2. Orienting

Trauma in our profession

“Emotions? What are those??”
– A lawyer who shall remain nameless

Professional trauma—personal

- Conflict between professionals
- Inappropriate emails, phone calls
- Inappropriate statements about age, gender, abilities
- Attacking witnesses on the stand
- Blaming of a professional for how a case (or situation) turned out
- Lack of civility—Judicial Officers, other attorneys
- “Sanctuary Trauma” — The Honorable Bruce Cohen
Professional Trauma - vicarious

- Stems from seeing / hearing stories of trauma experienced by other people
- We cannot release the effects in the normal course, so we hold it and end up with traumatic responses
- Seeing colleagues attacked as witnesses
- Inability to "fix" client's problems results in disappointment and dejection
- Happens when we "take on" clients' issues/battles as our own
- Cognitive dissonance

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

Ramifications - Physical and Emotional

- Tension
- Pain
- Hypersensitivity / hyperarousal
- Greater susceptibility to illness
- Feeling fatigued or drained
- Chronic illness
- Intense, unpredictable emotions
- Dramatic mood swings
- Uncontrollable feelings of rage
- Profound feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Inability to access feelings of safety, predictability, and joy
- Closed heart / Forgetting why we entered the profession
- Apathy / Disgust / Burnout

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

Mental and Behavioral

- Confusion and disorientation
- Inability to learn and concentrate
- Obsessive negative thoughts
- Loss of ability to reason and be reasonable
- Losing interest in activities
- Self-blame
- Becoming cynical and disenfranchised
- "Waiting for the other shoe to drop"
- Turning away from resources
- Acting out, impulsive, or risky behaviors
- Addiction/substance abuse
- Social isolation
- Depression
- Hypervigilance
- Perfectionist or OCD-like behaviors to regain sense of control
- Suicide / Suicidal ideation

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

* CoLAP Study
Signs of a Healthy Nervous System

- Understanding that we are all dysregulated from time to time, a healthy nervous system:
  - Experiences sympathetic AND parasympathetic responses
  - Operates within the zone of tolerance
  - Is available for social engagement
  - Is able to return to a regulated state after a triggering experience
  - Does not get ‘stuck on ON’ or ‘stuck on OFF’

4. Notice your breath
Fight Response

- Language / emotions – Expressions of causing harm or battle and anger
- Posture – Someone looks like they are fighting (leaning forward)
- Breath is short and rapid
- Clenched jaw, snarl, hands in fists, clawing actions (These may all be very subtle)
- This is common in adults/teenagers/school-aged children
- Almost non-existent in infants

Flight Response

- Language:
  - “I just want to hide until this is all over”
  - “I can’t do this anymore” (and then you exit)
- Posture:
  - Looking for an escape route- sometimes actually leaving room, conversation
  - Tapping feet/shaking legs*
  - Appearsborderline to flee
- Happens with children; however, many children do not want to sit still, so is it trauma manifestation or normal development? (Look to context, history, etc.)
Freeze response

- **Language:**
  - Cannot feel/Numb
  - Asking you to repeat yourself
  - Reports feeling relaxed/zoned out/floaty
- **Minimal affect**
- **Posture:**
  - Collapsed
  - Looks tense
- **Breathing is usually shallow**
- **Desire to do everything on their own, be alone**
- **“Shut down” or dissociation**

Tension patterns

- Is there bracing in any part of the posture?
- What is happening in the throat?
- What is happening in the hands/arms?
- Does the body look/feel connected to itself?
- What about the eyes?
- What about the neck?
- Is there evidence of discharge?
- Is there tension below collapse?
5. Resourcing

Self Care

- Community Supports – TALK to people, even if not about what happened
- The MOST important way humans heal is together, especially through laughter
- Meditation/breathing/breathe in nature (bike, beach, mountains, hug a tree)
- Exercise – get the stuck trauma energy moving
- Take a day off (assuming you get permission)
- Do one of your hobbies
- Spiritual pursuits – remember to connect to your beliefs and try to see the good in the world
- Stop watching the news / things that might trigger you
More Self Care

- Any touch work – massage / facial / spa day (when not in quarantine) and self-touch or healing/safe physical contact with loved ones (if quarantined together)
- Take a real lunch break and eat at a restaurant or go shopping for a walk during lunch
- Volunteer – feel good about doing something in the world
- Watch a funny movie / listen to your favorite music
- Creative expression in whatever way you love
- Play with your pets
- Get extra sleep
- Professional help – preferably someone trained in trauma healing
- Anything that makes you happy (that is not substance abuse) can be healing, and it’s better if it includes other people

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

6. Pendulation

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

Pendulation

- Microcosm
  - In your body
  - Moving from one area of discomfort or pain to a less painful or more comfortable area
- Macrocosm
  - Notice what in your life feels overwhelming, challenging, anxiety-producing, depressing, traumatic, or even unpleasant (e.g. news about the pandemic)
  - Find resources you can orient to or seek out for breaks (e.g. pets, walks, exercise)

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl
7. Titration

• Term from chemistry - let’s avoid explosions!
• Taking the smallest bite of the edge of the cookie
• Allowing for time to process, settle, become regulated before biting more off
  • Think about your regular court days and where you do this (or need to do this)
• Example: Call with family who is sick or who has bad news
• Notice triggers: Covid will trigger other traumas and grief. How much can you safely absorb/process/hold?

8. Taking care of your body
Taking care of your body

- Stress/trauma responses are chemical responses (adrenaline, cortisol, etc.)
- Your body is ready to act with these chemicals
- Movement is miraculous, and healing
- Can also complete thwarted defensive responses
- Energy in vs Energy out
  - Energy created inside and energy taken in need to be balanced
  - How can you use/release the energy you have?

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

9. Grieving

- Noticing the messages around you ("You’re being asked to stay home, not go to war." and "Shakespeare wrote King Lear in quarantine, what are you doing?")
- It is OK to grieving the loss of your 'normalcy': your life, your usual activities and time with friends, your sense of basic safety in the world (or even in the grocery store)
- Be aware that the traumatic experience of being in the midst of a pandemic can trigger old griefs and losses (especially watching the death tolls, hearing about friends or family who are ill or who have died)
- Take time and give yourself space to grieve
- Get support: call friends/family, find a counselor or SEP trained in grief/loss and/or trauma

© Cynthia Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl
10. Noticing

What do you notice?

- Even stillness (and being forced out of normal busy/active routines) can be triggering.
- Are you or are other people around you more activated?
  - Notice if you find yourself more in fight, flight or freeze.
  - Many people are experiencing waves of freeze, as you cannot fight or run from it.
- Are there things that are popping up for you now that you have more time at home?
- What do you notice in your body/language/emotions and how can you make space to process that?
- As you notice, if you can be present with what you notice, does it shift or dissipate? If you notice something unpleasant, can you shift your attention to something more pleasant or comforting (pendulation)?

© Cynthia Bowley and Rebecca Stahl

11. Self-touch

© Cynthia Bowley and Rebecca Stahl
Self-touch

- Self-touch can be very containing, supporting, or comforting
- Self-hug, tapping
- Re-connecting with a sense of self when shut down
- Notice how your body shifts when you’re tight/contracted and you pause and make contact with your body in a way that feels comforting/grounding/containing/supportive

© Cynthia N. Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl

“Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness.”

Peter A. Levine

Be gentle with yourself.

© Cynthia N. Bowkley and Rebecca Stahl