VICARIOUS TRAUMA: CARING FOR OURSELVES AND OUR COWORKERS

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THANKS TO:

Guidebook on Vicarious Trauma: Recommended Solutions for Anti-Violence Workers by Jan I. Richardson of the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children in London, Ontario for the Family Violence Prevention Unit, Health Canada

WHAT IS VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

Also known as secondary trauma, bystander trauma…

"The experience of bearing witness to the atrocities committed against another."

"Transformation in the self of a trauma worker or helper that results from empathic engagement with traumatized clients and their reports of traumatic experiences."

WHAT IS VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

“Vicarious trauma is the energy that comes from being in the presence of trauma and it is how our bodies and psyche react to the profound despair, rage and pain.”

PERSONAL STORY

May be triggering for some.

The courthouse and the van.

THE PERSONAL IMPACT OF SECONDARY TRAUMA

Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral	Spiritual	Interpersonal	Physical
• Diminished concentration • Confusion • Spaciness • Loss of meaning • Preoccupation with trauma • Trauma imagery • Apathy • Rigidity • Disorientation • Racing thoughts • Self-doubt • Minimization	• Powerlessness • Anxiety • Guilt • Survivor guilt • Shutdown • Numbness • Fear • Helplessness • Sadness • Depression • Hypersensitivity • Emotional roller coaster • Overwhelmed • Depleted	• Clingy • Impatient • Irritable • Withdrawn • Moody • Regression • Sleep disturbances • Appetite changes • Nightmares • Hyper-vigilance • Elevated startle response • Negative coping (smoking, alcohol, etc.)	• Questioning meaning of life • Loss of purpose • Lack of self-satisfaction • Pervasive hopelessness • Anger at higher power(s) • Questioning prior spiritual beliefs	• Withdrawal • Decreased interest in intimacy • Mistrust • Isolation from family/friends • Impact on parenting • Projection of anger or blame • Intolerance	• Shock • Sweating • Rapid heartbeat • Breathing difficulties • Somatic reactions • Aches and pains • Dizziness • Impaired immune system • Depersonaliza-tion/derealiza-tion

IMPACT OF SECONDARY TRAUMA ON JOB FUNCTIONING

Performance of job tasks	Morale	Interpersonal	Behavioral
• Decrease in quality • Decrease in quantity • Low motivation • Avoidance of job tasks • Increase in mistakes • Setting perfectionist standards • Obsession over detail	• Decrease in confidence • Loss of interest • Negative attitude • Apathy • Demoralization • Lack of appreciation • Detachment • Feelings of incompleteness	• Withdrawal from colleagues • Impatience • Decrease in quality of relationships • Poor communication • Subsuming own needs • Staff conflicts	• Absenteeism • Tardiness • Exhaustion • Faulty judgment • Irritability • Irresponsibility • Overwork • Frequent job changes

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

- Listening to victims' stories
- Exposure to strong emotions—anger, guilt, sorrow, fear
- Constant "state of emergency" at agency
- Not enough time to spend with each client
- Lack of resources
- Work environment

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

- Frustration that we can’t do “more”
- Bias/oppression/inequality affecting victims
- Frustration with “the system”
- Often don’t know what happens to clients in the end
- Feeling like we’re not making a difference—problem seems so vast

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

- “Martyr syndrome”—glorification of doing more with less, doing it all, “saving” clients/coworkers/the entire world
- Relationship between advocate and client—blurred boundaries
- Advocate’s own history of crime, abuse, and/or trauma.
- Personal circumstances in advocate’s life.
- What’s going on in the community and the larger world

PEOPLE WORKING WITH VICTIMS/SURVIVORS NEED:

- Time to mend
- Time to vent
- A sympathetic, supportive ear
- A colleague to recognize the signs and kindly “call us out”
- To take a break
- To take a vacation/time off

PEOPLE WORKING WITH VICTIMS/SURVIVORS NEED:

- Time to debrief
- Time to case plan
- To learn—training and continuing education, research
- To know our own limits
- To have boundaries (clients, colleagues, supervisors)
- To celebrate successes, minor and major
- To feel part of a larger movement

STRATEGIES TO CARE FOR OURSELVES AND OUR COLLEAGUES

15 minute group exercise (each group gets one question) :

1. What are three things we can do to help ourselves?
2. What are three things we can do to help our coworkers?
3. What are three things we can do organizationally?
4. What are some barriers to the above and how can we work to overcome them?