Understanding Vicarious Trauma & Exploring Self-Care

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Objectives

1. Define vicarious trauma through definitions and examples.
2. Review reactions to vicarious trauma on a personal and organizational level.
3. Understand PTSD symptoms and signs of unhealthy co-addictions.
4. Learn trauma stewardship principles to support healthy trauma stewardship.
5. Develop self-care plans and explore possibilities for changes in the workplace to become more trauma informed.
Goals

▪ Define vicarious trauma through definitions and examples.
▪ Review reactions to vicarious trauma on a personal and organizational level.
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Trauma

- Something out of the ordinary
- Overwhelms our ability to cope
- Often changes our world view
- Can affect our mind, body, and heart
- Can be caused by natural event or purposeful ill intent of another

“Vicarious traumatization is a negative reaction to trauma exposure and includes a range of psychological symptoms.”

https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/what-is-vicarious-trauma
Vicarious Trauma

Anyone working with survivors of trauma and violence is at risk of being negatively impacted by the varied effects of vicarious trauma. Factors that may make employees or volunteers more vulnerable to this occupational risk include:

- Prior traumatic experiences
- Social isolation, both on and off the job

Vicarious Trauma

- A tendency to avoid feelings, withdraw, or assign blame to others in stressful situations
- Difficulty expressing feelings
- Lack of preparation, orientation, training, and supervision in their jobs
- Being newer employees and less experienced at their jobs
Vicarious Trauma

- Constant and intense exposure to trauma with little or no variation in work tasks
- Lack of an effective and supportive process for discussing traumatic content of the work

Work-Related Trauma Exposure = Vicarious Trauma

Change in World View

Negative:
- Vicarious traumatization
- Secondary traumatic stress
- Compassion fatigue

Spectrum of Response

Neutral:
- Impact managed effectively

Positive:
- Vicarious resilience
- Vicarious transformation
- Compassion satisfaction
Factors of Vicarious Trauma

▪ Different things bother different people (ex: 9/11 limbs vs. post it notes)
▪ Differences between grief, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), compassion fatigue, and burnout
▪ Personal and professional (we cannot completely separate the two)

Factors of Vicarious Trauma

▪ When you have little control (find ways to get control back)
▪ Direct, indirect, one time, and cumulative
▪ When carried in a healthy way, vicarious trauma can also produce vicarious resilience
Risk and Resiliency Factors

- Personality and coping style
- Current life circumstances
- Spiritual resources
- Work style
- Social support
- Past trauma history

The Personal Impact of Secondary Traumatic Stress

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### The Personal Impact of Secondary Traumatic Stress

**Behavioral:**
- Clingy
- Impatient
- Irritable
- Withdrawn
- Moody
- Regression
- Sleep disturbances
- Appetite changes
- Nightmares
- Hypervigilance

**Behavioral:**
- Elevated startle response
- Use of negative coping (smoking, alcohol, or other substance misuse)
- Accident proneness
- Losing things
- Self-harm behaviors

**Spiritual:**
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Loss of purpose
- Lack of self-satisfaction
- Pervasive hopelessness
- Ennui
- Anger at God
- Questioning of prior religious beliefs

**Interpersonal:**
- Withdrawn
- Decreased interest in intimacy or sex
- Mistrust
- Isolation from friends
- Impact on parenting (protectiveness, concern about aggression)
- Projection of anger or blame
- Intolerance
- Loneliness

**Physical:**
- Shock
- Sweating
- Rapid heartbeat
- Breathing difficulties
- Somatic reactions
- Aches and pains
- Dizziness
- Impaired immune system
HAND: Understanding PTSD

- Hyperarousal of the autonomic nervous system (e.g., hypervigilance, sleep disturbance, difficulties concentrating, irritability, exaggerated startle response)
- Avoidance of internal (e.g., thoughts and feelings) and external (e.g., person, places, things) reminders of the trauma

HAND: Understanding PTSD

- Negative cognitions (e.g., memory deficits, persistent negative beliefs, distorted attributions related to the trauma event) and mood (e.g., affective numbing, diminished interest in activities, diminished pleasure, social withdrawal or detachment, constricted and negative affect)
HAND: Understanding PTSD

- Disturbing memories and re-experiencing of the traumatic event (e.g., flashbacks, upsetting images, dreams, and nightmares)

Characteristics of Co-addiction

- Collusion
- Obsessive preoccupation
- Denial
- Emotional turmoil
- Manipulation
- Excessive responsibility
- Compromise or loss of self
- Blame and punishment

Photo courtesy of Jaime Wheeler
Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

Burnout

- Linked to stressors in the occupational environment (Maslach, 1982)
- Emerges gradually over time
- Easily identified
- Can affect any profession regardless of client group
- Is about being “worn out” (Stamm, 2009-12)
Compassion Fatigue

- Results from listening to clients’ traumatic stories (Figley, 1995)
- Can emerge suddenly and without warning
- May not be easily identified
- Only affects those who work with traumatized victims
- Is about being “afraid” (Stamm, 2009-12)

Impact of Secondary Traumatic Stress on Professional Functioning

**Performance of Job Tasks**
- Decrease in quality
- Decrease in quantity
- Low motivation
- Avoidance of job tasks
- Increase in mistakes
- Setting perfectionist standards
- Obsession about detail

**Morale**
- Decrease in confidence
- Loss of interest
- Dissatisfaction
- Negative attitude
- Apathy
- Demoralization
- Lack of appreciation
- Detachment
- Feelings of incompleteness
Impact of Secondary Traumatic Stress on Professional Functioning

Interpersonal:
• Withdrawal from colleagues
• Impatience
• Decrease in quality of relationships
• Poor communication
• Subsume own needs
• Staff conflicts

Behavioral:
• Absenteeism
• Exhaustion
• Faulty judgment
• Irritability
• Tardiness
• Irresponsibility
• Overwork
• Frequent job changes

When organizations experience trauma and secondary trauma without trauma stewardship and vicarious resilience, the organization can become:

• Unsafe
• Punitive
• Stuck
• Missionless
• Crisis driven
• Fragmented
• Overwhelmed
• Valueless
• Directionless

Photo courtesy of Jaime Wheeler
It is not the load that breaks you, but the way you carry it.”

“Courage, the original definition of courage, when it first came into the English language it’s from the Latin word cor, meaning heart and the original definition was to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart”.

- Brené Brown

Photo courtesy of Jaime Wheeler
Practical Ways Agencies Can Support Healthy Trauma Stewardship for Those We are Serving. (including ourselves)

For staff to be healthy there must not only be available support and positive accountability but staff members must use it.

Self-care is meant to be both preventative and restorative.
We Want to Create Systems of Care that are Sustainable for:

▪ Survivors we are connecting with
▪ Teammates we are working with
▪ Our program
▪ Local community
▪ The larger community of the city
▪ Systemic change

Pillars of Vicarious Trauma-Informed Agencies
Healthy Workplaces

▪ Provide peer support
▪ Are proactive instead of reactive
▪ Have formal and informal trauma-informed practice
▪ Communicate staff and volunteer appreciation
▪ Develop self-care plans and adequate rest policies

Unhealthy Workplaces

▪ Suffer lost productivity
▪ Have poor organizational health
▪ Experience high staff turnover
Pillars

▪ Leadership and mission
▪ Management supervision
▪ Employee empowerment and work environment
▪ Training and professional development
▪ Staff health and wellness

Team Building to Combat Vicarious Trauma

▪ Retreats
▪ Celebrations
▪ Transparency
▪ Vulnerability
▪ Trainings
▪ ‘Programmed’ support
▪ Culture of support
▪ In-house wellness
▪ Family support
▪ Resources for therapy
▪ Joyful work environment
▪ Redefining ‘success’
Know Your Team: Consider Personality Types and Past Experiences

- Personality test tools
- Knowing past traumatic experiences that can trigger the present
- Honest, open communication daily
- Weekly check-ins individually and as a team
- Space to ‘fail’ (learn)

“Vicarious resilience and vicarious transformation are newer concepts reflecting the positive effects of this work. For instance, individuals may draw inspiration from a victim’s resilience that strengthens their own mental and emotional fortitude. Just as victims can be transformed in positive ways by their trauma, so can victim service providers and first responders.”

– The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit
“Self-awareness gives you the capacity to learn from your mistakes as well as your successes. It enables you to keep growing.”

- Lawrence Bossidy

The ABCs of Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Awareness
  - be attuned to one’s needs limits, emotions, resources
  - heed all sources of information, cognitive, somatic, intuitive
- Balance - among work, play, and rest
- Connection - to oneself, others, and to something larger
Questions to Ask Ourselves When Feeling Burnout

▪ What was I doing that was not effective?
▪ What was I doing that was effective?
▪ Who are your support people?
▪ What was your passion when you first started?
▪ What is your ‘why’?

Notes from Annie Lobert, Survivor

▪ Tear down old systems
▪ Build on core foundations (or start over if you have to)
▪ Navigate a new safe plan back to avoid repeated behaviors
▪ Establish safe boundaries (stop saying yes)
▪ Be brave – you can do this!
▪ Don’t come back until you’re ready
Practical Tips to Balance Out Vicarious Trauma

- Participate in groups alongside survivors
- Process after situations
- Look for the good and what was learned
- Keep boundaries and know your limits
- Remember what you have control over vs. influence over
- Celebrate life and have fun

3 Cs of Co-dependency Recovery That Allow Healthy Boundaries

- I didn’t cause it
- I can’t control it
- I can’t cure it
8 Dimensions of Wellness
- Emotional
- Spiritual
- Environmental
- Financial
- Occupational
- Social
- Physical
- Intellectual

Self-Care: Safety Plans

All staff will develop a safety plan which will be shared with their department supervisor and team.
Self-Care: Safety Plans

Safety plans are designed to help prevent or to respond to a crisis or dysregulation situation. Safety plans should include:

- Weekly self-care plans (includes 1 on-the-clock hour)
- Monthly self-care plans
- Yearly self-care plans (time off, types of vacations)

- Include ways of receiving encouragement/support
- Expect accountability and provide accountability lovingly to other team members
- Will update annually
Self-care: Quarterly Check Ins

Check For:

- Compassion satisfaction
- Burnout
- Secondary (vicarious) traumatic stress

Example: professional quality of life scale (PROQOL) version 5
Open-ended Questions

Check for open-ended questions such as:

▪ How have you used your available support?
▪ Personal reflections?
▪ Growth going forward?

The restorative things in life that truly matter transcend all cultures

Photo courtesy of Jaime Wheeler
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