

Vicarious Trauma - Outline

DEFINITION

The term vicarious trauma (Perlman & Saakvitne, 1995), also called “compassion fatigue” describes an occurrence generally associated with the “cost of caring” for others (Figley, 1982). Other terms used for compassion fatigue are:

- secondary traumatic stress (Stemm, 1995, 1997)
- secondary victimization (Figley, 1982)

It is believed that service providers working with trauma survivors experience vicarious trauma because of the work they do. Vicarious trauma is the emotional lingerings of exposure that service providers 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.

BURNOUT

Burnout is typically something that happens over time, and as it builds up a change, such as time off or a new and perhaps a different job, can take care of burnout or improve it. Vicarious trauma, however, is a state of tension and preoccupation of stories/traumatic experiences described by clients. This tension and preoccupation might be experienced by service providers in several ways. They might:

- avoid talking or thinking about what the trauma effected client(s) have been talking about, almost being numb to it
- be in a persistent state of emotional stress

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Service providers should be aware of the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma and the potential emotional effects of working with trauma survivors.

Signs and symptoms for service providers:

- experiencing difficulty talking about their feelings
- anger and/or irritation
- startle effect/being jumpy
- change in eating habits
- difficulty sleeping
- losing sleep over patients
- worried that they are not doing enough for their clients
- dreaming about their clients’ trauma experiences
- diminished joy toward things they once enjoyed
- feeling trapped by work as a service provider (counselor)
- no longer feeling satisfaction and personal accomplishment
- dealing with intrusive thoughts of clients with especially severe trauma histories
- feelings of hopelessness associated with their work/clients
- blaming others

Vicarious trauma can impact professional performance and function, as well as result in errors in judgment and mistakes. Service providers may experience:

BEHAVIOR

- frequent job changes
- tardiness
- anger/irritability
- absenteeism
- irresponsibility
- overwork
- exhaustion
- talking to oneself (a critical symptom)
- going out to avoid being alone
- dropping out of community affairs
- rejecting physical and emotional closeness

INTERPERSONAL

- staff conflict
- blaming others
- conflictual engagement
- poor relationships
- poor communication
- impatience
- avoidance of working with clients with trauma histories
- lack of interest in collaboration
- withdrawal and isolation from friends, family and/or colleagues
- change in relationship with family, friends and/or colleagues
- difficulty having healthy & rewarding relationships

VALUES/BELIEFS

- dissatisfaction
- negative perception
- loss of interest
- apathy
- blaming others
- lack of appreciation
- lack of interest and caring
- detachment
- hopelessness
- low self image
- worried about not doing enough
- questioning their frame of reference – culture, identity, world view, and/or spirituality
- Disruption in self-capacity (ability to maintain positive sense of self, ability to modulate strong affect, and/or ability to maintain an inner sense of connection)
- Disruption in needs, beliefs and relationships (safety, trust, esteem, control, and intimacy)

WORK PERFORMANCE

- low motivation
- increased errors
- decreased quality
- avoidance of job responsibilities
- over-involved in details/perfectionism
- lack of flexibility

Vicarious trauma can also impact personal life, such as relationships with family and friends, as well as health, both emotional and physical.

HEALING THE HEALER

Healers need to be conscience about ways to incorporate self-care in daily efforts to help others. Healers may not be aware of the impacts on behavior, interpersonal relationships, job, values/beliefs unless we are self-aware. Some ways to heal the healer may include:

- **Debriefing**

Taking time out to discuss your experience with a colleague or other outside helping professional. This will allow for reflection on what impacted you the most.

- **Cultural Cleansing**

Some rituals are built in to tribal ceremony to help heal the healer and strengthen bringing back perspective on the purpose healers serve.

Healing ceremony

Sweat Lodge

- **Self-Awareness**

“Why do we choose to become healers?”

For some it is a deep connection to a need to “save” or to “help” others out of their distress and misery.

Is it truly healthy to “help” and “save” when we may be suffering from our own personal distress and misery.