

# Vicarious Traumatization: What it is and What Can Be Done About it

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# VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- *Vicarious Trauma: The indirect experience of trauma from exposure to the stories of trauma victims, including the experience of some symptoms of trauma*
- *“[T]he human consequence of knowing, caring, and facing the reality of trauma”*  
*- Pearlman & Saakvitne, Trauma and the Therapist (1995)*
- *Alternative Terms: Secondary Traumatic Stress, Compassion Fatigue*

# OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

## FOR ALL PROFESSIONALS WHO DEAL WITH TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, OR GREAT SUFFERING

- *An unavoidable concomitant to working hard and caring: “[T]he only way to avoid vicarious traumatization is to fail to engage compassionately, even empathetically,” with the victims.*  
*- Jean Koh Peters, Representing Children in Child Protective Proceedings*
- *Traditional focus has been on mental health professionals, shelter workers, and emergency relief workers*
- *Increasing attention is now being given to the impact on legal personnel*

# SIGNATURE EFFECTS OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- Dissociation/Disconnection from self (walling off painful feelings, denial, avoiding, numbing)
- Disconnection from others (loss of trust, inability to relate, difficulty with intimacy)
- Loss of meaning (loss of faith in god, the universe, fairness, meaning in life)
- Intense, extreme feelings and reactions: anger, fear, hostility

# Signs in Daily Life

- **Trauma symptoms:** Nightmares, fear of perpetrators, difficulty concentrating, flashbacks, overwhelmedness, hypervigilance, hypersensitivity, numbness
- **Interpersonal Difficulties:** lack of empathy, intolerance of others, hostility
- **Emotional Distress:** depression, sense of isolation, anxiety, sadness, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, high stress
- **Physical symptoms:** sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, over-eating, lack of self-care

# RESULTS OF STUDY OF JUDGES

- *"[J]udges do, unequivocally, experience trauma symptoms with respect to their work."*  
- Peter Jaffe et al, "Vicarious Trauma in Judges", Juv & Fam Ct J. (Fall 2003)
- *63% of (105) judges experience some symptoms. Female judges more likely than male. Judges w/7 or more years of experience more likely than those with less.*
- *In another study, spouses were more aware than judges themselves of their symptomatology, and how this particular caseload had affected them.*
- *Biggest challenges in coping with these stresses were the isolation of the judicial role, and the extreme workload.*

# SYSTEMIC CONTRIBUTORS

- Problems in the court system, especially family and juvenile courts, can contribute to vicarious trauma for all participants
- Lack of resources including time, personnel and space, excessive caseloads, inadequate fact-finding, lack of representation, and lack of supportive services, are both indicative of and contribute to vicarious trauma

# REMEMBER

- “It cannot be reiterated too often: no one can face trauma alone.... An adequate support system [is vital].
- “The role of a professional support system is not simply to focus on the [professional] tasks but also to remind the [professional] of her own realistic limits and to insist that she take as good care of herself as she does of others.”
  - Judith Lewis Herman, TRAUMA AND RECOVERY 153 (1992)

# PRESCRIPTIONS FOR COPING

- Avoiding or eliminating VT is *not* the goal: The only way to do that is not to connect and not to care.
- Identifying and taking care of yourself as a person exposed to traumatic stressors *is* the goal.
- Key Principles: Seek to counter the 3 dominant effects of VT (i.e., disconnection from self, others, and loss of meaning) by reintegrating yourself, re-connecting with others, and reaffirming meaning in life
- Implement “A,B,C”: Awareness, Balance, Connection

# What Can We Do?

- Start with yourself – initiate a program of self-care. Then...
- Reach out to others. Develop a reliable support network, including friends, professional peers, and/or professional helpers
- Value your traumatic responses as information - use them to shape your advocacy

# “A, B, C” TIPS/STRATEGIES

- Have compassion for yourself
- Examine your daily life for the negative effects of stress, burnout, and VT
- Notice your triggers or events that correlate with your symptoms
- Self-care strategies and techniques: Sleep, Food and Water, Breathing, Exercise, Nature, Time Off

# TIPS/STRATEGIES, cont'd

- Bring self-care into your work environment (music, art, etc) and daily schedule (breaks, walks)
- Recreation and Respite - avoid numbing/avoidant activities, seek experiences that rejuvenate and reconnect you, e.g., journaling, meditation, music, dancing, gardening, walks
- Strengthen connections to yourself, intimates, colleagues, friends, and community
- Mourn your losses. Practice gratitude.
- Remember that there is more to life than your work.
- Remember this is an ongoing process. You're never "done."

# THE GOOD NEWS

- While doing work involving traumatic stresses can be difficult and painful, it can also be profoundly rewarding, and can do enormous good. Sometimes just being a caring listener is a gift to your clients.
- Your struggles with painful material show you are empathically connected and you are humanly alive. **THE WORLD NEEDS THIS!**
- Being a “compassionate witness” to suffering helps both the sufferer and the society, and furthers justice which heals both
  - See Ann Freedman, “Fact-Finding in Civil Domestic Violence Cases: Secondary Traumatic Stress and the Need for Compassionate Witnesses,” 11 A.U. J. of Gender, Soc. Pol. & Law 567 (2003)

# The Good News (cont.)

- “Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are pre-requisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.”

– Judith Herman, Trauma & Recovery (1992)