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Vicarious Trauma

Take a break and read this. Too busy? Feeling overwhelmed? That's exactly why you should take a break and read this. In the field of sexual violence prevention, we take on so much: case management, community events, grants, hotline calls, counseling sessions, hospital accompaniment, staff meetings, court hearings.....are you feeling tired yet? Are you feeling burned out yet? If you do, you are not alone. If you do, there are steps you can take to not only help yourself be present at work again, but also to help those you serve to receive your best effort each and every day.



When we chose to fight systems of oppression, when we chose to help those who have been victimized, when we hear experience after experience for year after year, we might become worn and weary from the weight of the work. Feelings of burnout and stress in helping professions are a result of vicarious trauma and are not only normal, but to be expected. How we manage our feelings that stem from vicarious trauma can either help or hurt us. Therefore, by learning how to recognize when the work is affecting us in a negative way, we can learn how to manage your stress and feelings of overwhelm in a healthy way so that we can bring our best self into the work every day.

What is Vicarious Trauma?

Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky (2007) describes vicarious trauma as a “trauma exposure response.” In her book, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*, she explains the cyclical nature of vicarious trauma and the ways one can take care of themselves. She describes this process as being trauma stewardship: “...the entire conversation about how we come to do this work, how we are impacted by our work, and how we subsequently make sense of and learn from our experiences” (p.31-32).

Other terms for vicarious trauma are: provider fatigue, compassion fatigue, and/or secondary trauma. They all refer to the same phenomenon which feels like we have exhausted hearts, minds, bodies, and souls from helping victim/survivors through their painful experiences.

What are symptoms of Vicarious Trauma?

Ok, you say, this is starting to make sense....but how can I tell if I have been affected? Different people deal with vicarious trauma in different ways – positively, negatively, or

a combination of both. Ask yourself the following questions about coping methods and give yourself permission to relate to their meaning.

Since working in the field of anti-sexual violence, have you...?

1. Gained or lost weight because of increased or decreased appetite
2. Began smoking or noticed you are smoking more
3. Replay or visualize stories from victim/survivors in your head for long periods of time
4. Not been able to enjoy sexual activity due to the occupation of work
5. Feel physical anxiety or annoyance when the hotline rings or the pager goes off
6. Feel relieved when victim/survivors cancel appointments
7. Deliberately avoid your email, voicemail, and coworkers because of feeling overwhelmed
8. Had no reaction to stories that used to affect you or that friends and family find disturbing
9. Become cynical towards the work on a more frequent level
10. Started, resumed, or increased your shopping, sugar, caffeine, chocolate or alcohol intake
11. Laugh at humor you once would have thought was offensive
12. Stopped listening to friends and family members problems for as long as you used to

If you found yourself becoming defensive, feeling guilty, or relating all too well to the questions above, it is possible that you have been experiencing vicarious trauma and have taken on some negative coping mechanisms. While they might seem beneficial in the moment, negative coping mechanisms have long-term mental and physical affects that not only affect the individual but those around you.

What Can You Do?

You can begin by recognizing that the work you do is affecting you, and that this is normal. The very nature of anti-violence work is physically and emotionally taxing. Here are some suggestions on practices that you can begin incorporating in your daily work-life. Remember that when you tell yourself you don't have time for any of the following, that that is exactly when you should take the time. By trying the following practices, you will return to your work day refreshed and renewed.

First and foremost you can start by being present again. Being present is the concept that you are not disassociating (numbing out) from yourself; you are aware and living in the moment once again. Ways to do this vary greatly, but try this:

Develop good eating practices. This is not the same as good eating habits (eating your veggies, and etc.). While that is important, good eating practices is different. Eating in a space that is quiet and meditative helps you to reenergize your spirit. When you feel too busy to take a break from the building for lunch, try this:

Try eating lunch away from your computer. If possible, go to a space that has light and fresh air. Then chew your food slowly while thinking about where your food came from, all the people who worked in the fields and factories to bring it to you, and the land that grew it for you. This will help you slow down and focus on the energy within yourself and within the nourishment you are receiving.

Secondly, choose your involvement. This is different from the old saying, "choose your battles." Choosing your involvement in various office activities gives you control over your own happiness instead of the other way around. By giving yourself permission to opt out of harmful practices, you can free your mind and heart of the extraneous stress

you didn't realize you experience on a daily basis. Once you start identifying your time spent on all the little stressors, this becomes easier and easier to do. For example, try this:

Do not gossip. Gossiping may seem fun or relieving in the moment but it is actually hurtful to not only those being talked about, but to yourself and your precious energy. By putting negative energy out to the world, it perpetuates negativity instead of inspiring healing. So, when those around you begin to gossip, try this:

Politely excuse yourself and go to a place you feel at peace. Soon, those around you will understand that you are not going to participate and will not burden your time and energy with pessimism.

And last, start an organizational practice of creativity. When creativity is diminished, people often feel helpless and hopeless; as if what they do is not making a difference. Therefore, stimulating and fostering creativity helps renew that sense of achievement and brightness that is vital for workplace production. For example, try this:

Decorate your office or workspaces to reflect your personal style. Oftentimes we forget about our physical space and how colors, textures, and stimuli in our surroundings can affect our mood. By incorporating plants, artwork, and lamps, a space can be transformed into a meditative and relaxing environment for all who enter. This also helps to set the stage for those we serve to feel more at home. To get all your coworkers involved in the make-over, try this:

Have an all-staff meeting and discuss ways to decorate that will revitalize each work space and at that meeting encourage each staff member to paint their own picture to hang on their wall or somewhere in the building. Encourage family pictures, personal mementos from vacations, and radios at low volume.

Start Today

Now that you have recognized that the work you do is affecting you, remember to take care of yourself in healthy and positive ways. Refreshing your mind and spirit will not only make you feel better, but will positively affect those around you as well. By working in the field of anti-violence we fight oppression on many forms and it eventually seeps into our hearts and minds. So, recognizing this and taking care of ourselves is the first step to refreshing and sustaining our energy in the movement.

Resources

For more information on vicarious trauma and Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky, please visit:
www.traumastewardship.com

Help for the Helper: The Psychophysiology of Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma
Babette Rothschild

Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization (Norton Professional Books)
Laurie Anne Pearlman & Karen W. Saakvitne

