Vicarious Trauma: When Helping Hurts

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Introductions

Today we will have a mixture of:

• Learning about the impact of vicarious trauma, secondary stress, burnout & compassion fatigue vs. trauma
• Trauma as a parallel process
• Impact on self, organization and clients
• Practicing self-care activities; to use for self or with clients
• Discussion
Let's Take a Look at the Terminology...
The experience of feeling overwhelmed, overworked and possibly even traumatized are so common that we now have names to better explain them...

- Burnout
- Secondary Stress/Trauma
- Compassion Fatigue
- Vicarious Trauma
Ethics of Care

- Nel Nodding's work and its application
- The need for boundaries
- Professional responsibility in the context of the care relationship
Ethical Concerns Related to These Concepts…

• When these issues occur workers can become carless or less bounded and harm may be done to clients or ethical violations may occur.
REAL LIFE ADVENTURES by GARY WISE & LANCE ALDRICH

YES, THIS IS CUSTOMER SERVICE. THAT'S WHY WHEN I ANSWERED THE PHONE I SAID, "HELLO, CUSTOMER SERVICE," INSTEAD OF, SAY... "HELLO, FBI HEADQUARTERS." NOW THEN, WHAT SEEMS TO BE YOUR PETTY LITTLE PROBLEM?

You can kind of tell when it's time for somebody to take a vacation.
Burnout

• **Burnout:** Burnout is a commonly used term to describe when helpers begin to feel exhausted by their work. Burnout usually begins by affecting one's attitude towards clients and the work. If unacknowledged, it may begin to manifest itself in other forms such as physical exhaustion, sense of self as ineffective, avoiding work, and/or irritability. Burnout can happen on an administrative and/or clinical level. It is often relieved with a shift in responsibility, task removal, support or vacation.
Ideas for Addressing Burnout

- Being aware of a shift in one's usual perspective towards work or clients
- Acknowledging that a break or shift is needed (self or other)
- Processing
- Paying attention to the basics...eat/sleep
- Taking time for lunch...vacation...personal day
- Self-care
Important Hallmarks

• Attitude

• When the humor turns to true negativity

• “Loosing the capacity to believe that we can make change.” (Connie Burk)

• Passion shifts
Compassion Fatigue

- **Compassion Fatigue:** The emotional residue of working with suffering clients; particularly those suffering from traumatic events or those who are in recovery. Professionals who work with people, particularly those who are experiencing despair, must contend with not only the normal stress or dissatisfaction of their work, but also with the emotional and personal feelings for the client and or situation.

Ex: Sidney...traumatic loss...imagining yourself in their situation
Possible Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

• Excessive worry about clients
• Thoughts about clients interrupting personal life
• Taking work home... emotionally
  – Case example
• Over-emotional responses/reactions to client
• Ruminating on work-related topics
• Loss of self outside of work
Compassion Fatigue Continued…

• Feeling yourself physically respond to clients
• Taking clients success or failure personally
• Emotional and physical exhaustion
• Compassion fatigue may lead to susceptibility to vicarious trauma
• Loss of identity outside of work roles
Secondary Trauma/Stress
Definition

Refers to the stress reactions that workers may have from the exposure to the traumatic stories or experiences of another. These reactions are often characterized as psychological or emotional distress. If unaddressed, over time they will negatively impact the worker as likely have impairing effect on the individual.
Possible Symptoms of Secondary Trauma/Stress

- Mood disturbance
- Anxiety
- Detachment and isolation
- Change in professional demeanor
Kind of Like Math...

Traumatic Event + Intense Fear, Numbing Terror = Behaviors, Symptoms, Trouble with Coping, Impairment of Functioning
Vicarious Trauma Definition

Vicarious trauma is also known as secondary trauma. Vicarious trauma is the gradual change or disruption of a helper’s inner system of thoughts, beliefs, feelings/emotions, images, and spirit as a result of repeated exposure to other’s traumatic experiences. The worker will begin to experience or re-experience their own symptoms of trauma.
Vicarious Trauma

- Workers begin to look symptomatic of trauma without the “event.”
- Exposure to the trauma of others/clients becomes a trigger for past trauma and/or trauma symptoms.
Possible Symptoms of Vicarious Traumatization

- Physical - already existing symptoms can become more severe and even chronic; headaches, migraines, backaches, gastrointestinal problems, etc.
- Mental - inability to complete tasks, dreams/nightmares that may include images or other people’s stories of your own
- Emotional - helplessness, hopelessness, feelings of doubt, mistrust, avoidant behaviors, feeling unsafe, intrusive thoughts
- Global (some call it spirit) – changes in one’s world view
- Feeling impaired: work, relationships, functioning
- Numb and isolated
Possible Risk Factors...

- Being a trauma survivor
- Addiction history
- History of depression
- History of anxiety
- Unresolved personal issues
Definition

In psychoanalytic theory, counter-transference occurs when the therapist begins to project his or her own unresolved conflicts onto the client. While transference of the client’s conflicts onto the therapist is considered a healthy and normal part of psychodynamic therapy, the therapist’s job is to remain neutral. At one time, counter-transference was widely believed to contaminate the therapeutic relationship. Current thinking is more complex. (Fritcher, 2009)
Countertransference in Action

• Unexplained dislike
• Inability to empathizes
• Over emotional response
• Unprovoked hostility not otherwise accounted for (we all can have a bad day)
• Excessive like for supervisee
• Over empathy
Continued

• Over empathy (challenge for helping professional supervisors)
• Dread of supervision
• + or – preoccupation with supervisee… intrusive thoughts
• Difficulty paying attention to them
• Feeling “hurt” when challenged
• Continued miscommunication
More on what it looks like in action...

- Provoking and affect
- Over concern…over protection
  - This can destroy a team
- Special considerations not extended to others
- Interest in a worker beyond the norms
  - Ex: should not know about the sex life of workers
- Secrets
Countertransference and Trauma Work

• Especially important as the ethical implications
• Trauma work may trigger countertransference and put the worker at risk for compromised service
• It is OUR duty to provide no harm and thus OUR duty to watch and manage our countertransference
Good News

• Awareness can be a wonderful tool for professional and personal growth

• Its inevitable and not a weakness
Parallel Process

This concept helps us understand recovery from the impact of working with survivors of trauma.

Not to be confused with parallel processing.

In Supervision…it is when two like things have a similar (not necessarily identical) trajectory and we can draw the methods of application and apply them somewhat universally.

Ex: Supervision and Therapy can look similar as they are both about self-exploration and personal growth.
We Understand It… Now What Do We Do?

• This issue needs to be addressed on all levels of system
• We need to start from the beginning
• We cannot be afraid to talk about it…normalize it as part of the profession and not a sign of personal weakness
Connection to Community, Work Environment, and Self
A-B-C’s

Addressing vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue in your organizational setting and personal practice
– Saakvitne and Pearlman (1996)

- Awareness
- Balance
- Connection
Trauma Informed Organizations

- Provide supervision
- Have good benefits
- "Force" people to take their time
- Not overwhelm with case loads
- Spread acuity around
More…

• Properly train workers
• Recognize that impact is normal and address it as a constant
• Develop a culture of support (formal and informal)
• No shame
"Oh, I know! I've been telling him for years that he needs to take better care of himself, stop working so hard, get some exercise ... Oh, here he is now."
Peter Levine’s Contributions

• Most people compress their trauma feelings
• Act of compressing energy/emotion is exhausting
• The disconnection is part of the trauma experience…survival mechanism
• Leaning into self first and then others is essential to making the connections necessary for recovery.
Responsibility to Self and Co-workers

• We are herd animals.
• Healing from trauma best happens in community. Ex: war buddies
• Having people who understand our experience.
• Notice...ask...listen...intervene.
• Not be afraid of what we hear....it is not about us.
More on responsibility...

- Reframe it as an honor to keep a fellow human company while they struggle
- Not allow the struggles of our co-workers to be gossip
- Don’t take out our stress and aggression on each other
- Work together to provide formal and informal support
Tools for Recovery and Self Care
Self

• Need some degree of self awareness
• Should include both internal and external support
• Think Levine…connection… connection … connection
• NOT SELFISH OR WEAKNESS
Minute Meditation
a Self Care Exercise
Self-Care as a PRIORITY
(an ethical obligation)

• Shift your thinking. Self-care is not selfish. See it as something you deserve.
• Develop and implement individual self-care. Set a pace that is reasonable and works for you.
• Leisure time
• Challenge your own negative beliefs.
• Personal objects of comfort and making your space pleasant.
• Humor and laughter
A reminder…for the list

Practicing professional self-care in this way doesn’t mean you are less dedicated. It means you have made an active commitment and choice to maintain your effectiveness as a social worker.

~NASW news, November 2008
Malory’s Life Lessons in Self-Care

1. You should always have plenty of fresh, chilly water available. (preferably with three ice cubes in it).
2. Two treats first thing in the morning sets a positive tone for the day.
3. When you have got to go…go!
4. A breath of fresh air and a short walk (no matter the weather) almost always makes you feel better.
5. Sleep is important and especially great if you can find a sunny place to sleep.
6. A belly scratch is more important than reading your mail or answering the phone when you walk into the house.
7. If you need something from someone, stare at them until they notice you. If that doesn’t work, keep staring, then bark…(one should do it) and then keep staring. Your needs cannot be avoided forever.
8. Breathe…take several deep dog sighs during the day.
9. Connect with your pack, huddle in for warmth and comfort. You do not need to manage it all on your own.
Thank you for your time and energy today!
Please contact me for more information about our trainings and self-care tools.

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Resources

• Peter Levine: Waking the Tiger (1997)
• Peter Levine: Healing Trauma (2005)
• Judith Herman: Trauma and Recovery (1992)
• Bessel Van der kolk; assorted work and lectures. Most recent April 2010 in Cleveland, Ohio