Worn Out, Worn Down, and Ready to Recharge: Helping the Helper

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WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND BURN-OUT?
Employees who FEEL stressed are three times more likely than people in low stress jobs:
- to suffer from depression,
- twice as likely to think about quitting their job,
- twice as likely to work overtime regularly.
Burn-out is the depletion of our resources, both physical and psychological, caused by our desire to achieve certain standards and expectations that are often impossible to humanly achieve.

Burn-out can happen to anyone at home or on the job.
Early Symptoms of Burnout – 1st Stage (Livingston-Booth, 1985)

- The speeding up of activity:
  - drink and eat more quickly on the job or on the run
  - feel under the pressure of time, cannot catch your breath or catch up on the demands
  - feel as if you are driven
Later Symptoms of Burnout – 2\textsuperscript{nd} Stage

- Disrupted sleep
- Over-reactions to difficulties
- Increased irritability
- A less reliable memory
- Beginning of physical symptoms such as tension headaches, muscle pain, lowered immune system...
Vicarious trauma (VT) is the short and long-term consequence of working with trauma victims/survivors and the painful and disruptive effect this can have on the trauma worker. The effects in all of the following areas—physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, spiritual—can persist for months and sometimes even years after work with traumatized clients without effective intervention.
Who is at risk for VT?

- Psychologists/Psychiatrists
- Social workers
- Lawyers
- Disaster relief workers
- Nurses/Medical Doctors
- Emergency Service Professionals
- Police
- Crisis phone line attendants
- Shelter workers
- Others
Traumatic cases for front line workers working with high risk families

- Domestic violence
- Sexual assault
- Child abuse
- Abductions
- Child Death
STAGES OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA

1. Numbness and Shock
2. Confusion-nothing makes sense
3. Renewed Hope and Resilience
How VT affects our world view

- Shattered assumptions about basic beliefs in our world for safety, security, trust, justice
- Heightened awareness of vulnerability and the fragility of life
- Powerlessness of victim transferred to worker
- Sense of alienation develops
Diminished view of humanity

- May feel bitter, cynical, or pessimistic
- May be angry at people and the world in general
- May ponder the fate of the human race
- Uncomfortable sense of separateness from family, friends, or coworkers (can be compounded by rules of confidentiality) (McCann & Pearlman, 1990)
Non-traumatized beliefs

- Before VT, individuals may:
  - believe they are above average
  - believe children are above average
  - underestimate chances of negative events
  - overestimate chances of positive events
  - overestimate personal control

(Dr. Anna Salter)
"I love my work but lately I find it contaminating my personal life. I have nightmares about the horrible things I hear about from clients. My sex life has deteriorated, I'm irritable and distractible, I'm afraid for my kids and tend to overprotect them, and I don't trust anybody anymore. I don't know what is happening to me."

Advocate/counselor
“It’s hard dealing with child victims when they are the same age as the ones you have at home”

Police Officer
“It actually feels good to hear that I am not the only one who feels depressed and helpless and that these issues are worth studying. Fortunately, the stress has decreased with experience and time for me, but I still have vivid memories of quite traumatic experiences representing victims of domestic violence who were so betrayed that it was difficult to continue to have faith in humankind.”

A lawyer
Cases of horrible, sexual, predatory exploitation of children haunt me. I keep my balance and my job as a judge by profoundly guarding myself against being swept away by the gruesome evidence I have to confront.
Factors that Influence a Person’s Vulnerability to Vicarious Trauma

- Individual Factors
- Life Situation Factors
- Organizational Factors
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BURN-OUT and VT

BURN-OUT
- Cumulative
- Predictable
- Builds over time
- Results in work dissatisfaction
- Unaddressed leads to serious health problems

VT
- Narrower focus
- Harmed by the kind of work we do
- Intrusive imagery
- Changes the meaning of life
- Affects our world view
Differences (cont.)

- The *bad news* is that there is not much that can be done about burnout other than changing the organizational culture or changing where one works.

- The *good news* is that there are effective interventions for vicarious trauma. (Pryce, Shackelford, and Pryce, 2007)
Dump your bucket!
What prevents you from getting help?

- You believe you should not experience personal problems—you should be able to handle anything.
- Personal problems are a sign of inadequacy or failure.
- There is no safe place at my agency/organization to get help.
- You believe you can take care of yourself.
- You intellectualize and/or disassociate from the emotional impact of your problems. (Dawber, 1999)
Claiming Your Health

- No magic pill
- There are symptoms: Pay attention
- Clarify: From the inside or outside?
- Figure out your current level of stress:
  - Stress (helpful/good stress or at least not harmful)
  - Over stressed (Pay attention)
- Burnout
- Dis-ease (Crispy, Crossed Over)
- Avoid Pathologizing your responses; being affected by others pain is a normal reaction (McCann & Pearlman, 1990)
Health Strategies

- Intellectual Stimulation but not overload; need balance/ not all work reading or mind engagement
- Emotional support systems: counseling if necessary
- Spiritual meaning: purpose, hope, support, belief system, connectedness, inspiration – sense of being part of something much bigger
- Physical: sleep, eating, exercise & healthy relationships
- Social: have a life – balance
- Creative: finding & recharging the artist within
Life Pie

- What or who takes energy?
- Where do you get it back?
- How much is left at the end of a typical work day?
- How do you recharge?
- Do you tend to attract positive or negative energy?
- Do you tend to attract “high drama” or calm?
PROFESSIONAL and ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

- Supportive policies that recognize the high risk nature of our work
- Expect normative failure
- Acknowledgement of the connections between individual and work-related stresses
- Meaningful supervision, consultation and peer support
- Balancing our workload and creating a variety of tasks
- Good boundaries/limit setting
- Proactive plans for coping
PROFESSIONAL and ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES (cont.)

- Comfortable physical work setting
- Opportunity for individual/group debriefing on difficult situations
- Programs that respond to stress, critical incidents and wellness
- Getting support/help when we need it (EAP)
- Bringing humour, laughter and celebration of victories into our work
- Work culture that abundantly expresses appreciation and positive regard for workers
- **Break the silence and shame surrounding it**
SUMMARY

- Name the problem
- Normalize the experience
- Build the topic into the curriculum
- Build a supportive network
- Provide an opportunity for debriefing (group & individual)
- Provide opportunity for VT supervision (help worker to sort out VT, Burn-out and VT reactions)
- Provide specialized educational programs
- Provide good role models and mentors (experienced workers need to speak out)
- Create organizations that recognize and respond to VT well
What works for you?
“To keep the lamp burning we have to keep putting oil in it.

Remember

By Mother Teresa