Vicarious Traumatization and Compassion Fatigue

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Southern Network of Specialized Care
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"I'm right there in the room, and no one even acknowledges me."

Learning Outcomes:

- Awareness of the theoretical framework and contributing factors that may lead to vicarious traumatization and compassion fatigue.
- Participants will develop an after-care plan focusing on self-care activities and establishing balance in their professional and personal lives.

Quiz – Evaluation of our own self care.

Professional Quality of Life Self-Test

– Dr. Beth Hudnall Stamm

- Measurement tool that reveals levels of compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic
- Available for free online
- Available in 17 different languages

Trauma

- In order to better understand vicarious traumatization, it is important to define what "trauma" means to both the trauma helper and the trauma survivor.

Trauma

- To experience trauma is to come face to face with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature (Herman, 1992).
- Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.

Trauma

- Trauma is a subjective process in that the individual attaches his/her own significance and interpretation to an event.
- Injury caused by a traumatic event may differ in length of time and degrees of distress depending on the nature of the survivor, the nature of the traumatic event, and the personal and social resources available to the survivor.

Vicarious Traumatization

- VT is the transformation or change in a worker's inner experience as a result of responsibility for and empathic engagement with traumatized clients.
- This includes witnessing signs of abuse and neglect, vivid descriptions of traumatic events, reports of intentional cruelty and the human capacity for evil.

Vicarious Traumatization

- VT is the natural consequence of our being human, connecting to and caring about trauma survivors as we hear about and see the effects of trauma in their lives.
- When you hear, witness, and empathically feel the impact of traumatic events, especially the impact of interpersonal violence and betrayal, your personal balance can be lost.

Vicarious Traumatization

- Your beliefs about yourself and the world change, your relationships to yourself and others change, and your feelings and values change.
- Confusion, apathy, isolation, anxiety, sadness and illness are often the result

Occupational Hazard

- As helpers, our vulnerability to VT is unavoidable because our work involves listening empathically and assisting traumatized people with the goal of helping them.
- We witness-with feelings-and we feel not only compassion but responsibility, coupled with varying degrees of helplessness and control.

Existential Issues

- As people who work with survivors of trauma, we repeatedly face evidence that safety, trust, esteem, intimacy, control-even life itself-are all precarious.
- Facing the inevitability of death and loss, grappling with questions of meaning, facing the brokenness of our world, are routinely raised by our work.

Vicarious Trauma + Burnout = Compassion Fatigue

- The cumulative risk of experiencing VT is the additional effects of worker burnout which can lead to *Compassion Fatigue*
- Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest or motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place.

Compassion Fatigue

- Compassion Fatigue has been recognized as a state of tension and preoccupation with the traumatized client by re-experiencing traumatic events.
- Compassion fatigue is often referred to as exhaustion and desensitization to violent and traumatic events and can result in avoidance, numbing, and persistent anxiety associated with the client.

Compassion Fatigue

- Compassion Fatigue is the cost of caring for others in emotional pain and is regarded as "a disorder that affects those who do their work well". (Figley, 1995)
- Compassion Fatigue is markedly characterized by emotional, physical and spiritual exhaustion.

Changes

- You may notice these changes in yourself at work, at home, by yourself, and with family, partners, friends, and acquaintances.
- You may adopt new behaviors or stop doing things you used to enjoy. You may think about these changes or you may not notice them unless someone else points them out to you.

Changes

As an example…

- Many people who work with survivors of childhood sexual abuse find that their relationships with children are profoundly affected.
- Parents and caretakers often feel frightened for their own children , fiercely protective of them, and extremely reluctant to entrust anyone with their care.

Changes

- Others may find that even observing children in public places (playgrounds, grocery stores, museums) brings up intrusive images or thoughts of bad things being done to children.
- Is there anything you do differently because of your work? Do you avoid people or situations?

Our Own Vulnerability

- Working with trauma survivors reminds us daily of our own vulnerability to traumatic events, the dangerousness of the world we live in, and how the things that matter the most to us (e.g. our loved ones, our health, our sense of meaning and purpose) can be suddenly ripped away and seemingly lost forever.

Our Own Vulnerability

- It is not the absence of compassion that creates problems in one's work- it is what compassion is replaced with.
- Anger, numbness, disinterest, resentment, sarcasm, cynicism.

Loss of the Familiar

- A pervasive loss of the familiar is a hallmark of trauma. We confront this reality every day.
- Our work brings us face to face with our own vulnerability to loss, both in our own lives, and in the lives of those we love.
- In this way, trauma work assaults our self-protective believes about safety, control, predictability, and protection.

Risking Connection

- If we care and feel deeply- we risk connection rather than wall ourselves off or numb ourselves out- then we are at risk for the pain of loss.
- There is no way around this central fact of being human, yet it is intolerable for most of us to hold this awareness in our conscious minds or to be constantly aware of our vulnerability.

Empathy

- Empathy is essential to the creation of a therapeutic relationship with a client .
- Empathy can be considered both an asset and a liability (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).
- Over time, working in a continuously emotionally charged situation, this empathy can become overtaxed and is exhausted even when the worker is diligently maintaining self-care skills.

Empathy

- The trauma survivor's material not only evokes our empathic response but may also stir up the memory and personal pain in ourselves.
- Our own unresolved trauma experiences may be re-enacted and parallel the same response as the trauma survivors.

Process, not an Event

- VT is a process, not an event. VT happens over time. It is individual; specific things that are difficult for one worker may be less difficult for another worker. Our signs and symptoms may differ as well as our strong feelings and defenses against those feelings.

Responses to VT

- VT shows up in our strong reactions of grief, rage, and outrage, which grow as we repeatedly hear about and see people's pain and loss and are forced to recognize the human potential for cruelty and indifference
- It is also evident in our numbing, our protective shells, and our wishes not to know.

Reason for Hope

- A belief that we can be helpful, that we have something to offer.
- A belief that people can heal, change, grow.
- A belief that love and goodness exist in the world and are as powerful as cruelty and evil.

Reason for Hope

- A belief that a respectful compassionate relationship or interaction can make a difference.

  This is not a blind hope, but hope drawn from experience.

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3 Layers of VT

- Our context
- Ourselves, the workers
- Our clients

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Our Context

- Our social context that denies or underrates trauma and its after effects.
- A political context that underfunds psychological treatment for trauma.
- A cultural context that blames the victim and glorifies violence and victimization as entertainment.

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Our Context

- An organizational context that fails to provide staff the resources necessary to do the work they believe they can do on behalf of their clients.

Our Context

- Our unique experience of VT. Determined by the unique interaction between your work setting, the diagnosis and number of clients and their traumas, and the social, political, cultural context, and your own professional identity, resources, support, life circumstances, and coping style.

Ourselves, the Helpers

- Unrealistic expectations for oneself as a helper.
- A personal trauma history that may be reawakened by client material and may make one particularly sensitive to certain transferences or expectations from patients.

Ourselves, the Helpers

- Unfounded beliefs about the value of stoicism or unresponsiveness that leave the helper feeling ashamed and silenced about his/her feelings.
- Personal coping strategies that do not help or carry heavy costs (addictions, numbness, isolation.)

Ourselves, the Helpers

- Current stressful personal life experiences (Divorce, aging parents, acting out children).
- Working in areas in which a helper has insufficient training or inadequate theoretical understanding of the issues.
- Reluctance to barriers to using supervision and consultation, seeking continuing education, or taking vacations.

Ourselves, the Helpers

- Fear of judgment, reprisal or ridicule
- Fear of exposing ourselves
- Illusions of omnipotence
- Difficulty with trusting other professionals

Our Clients

- The difficulty of their interpersonal style, often developed in response to untrustworthy or exploitive contexts.
- Their idealized or intense negative expectations of the helper.
- Current dangers they may be facing (safety concerns especially in domestic violence situations),

Our Clients

- Their multiple problems and limited resources.
- Their abusive histories.
- The poignancy and intensity of their suffering.
- The crisis of a recent traumatic experience.

Our Clients

- Helplessness and vulnerability of child patients.
- Their self destructive behaviours, self-hatred, despair, and chronic suicidal wishes.

Signs and Symptoms of VT

What changes can we see in ourselves and others?

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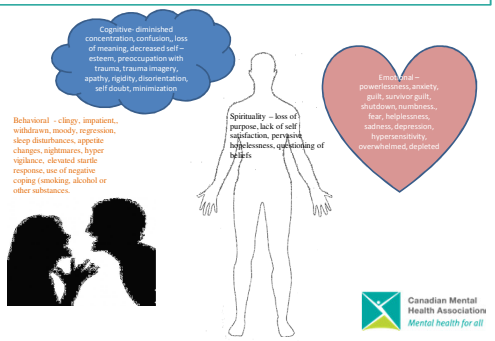
Signs and Symptoms of VT- The Personal



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Signs & Symptoms of VT- The Professional

- Performance
  - Decrease in quality and quantity of work
  - Low motivation
  - Avoidance of job tasks
  - Increased mistakes
  - Setting perfectionist standards
  - Obsession with detail

Moral
- Decrease in confidence
- Loss of interest
- Dissatisfaction
- Negative attitude
- Apathy
- Demoralization
- Lack of appreciation
- Detachment

Interpersonal
- withdrawal from colleagues
- Impatience
- Decrease in quality of relationship
- Poor communication
- Staff conflicts

Behavioral
- Absenteeism
- Exhaustion
- Irritability
- Overwork

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The ABC'S of Addressing VT

Awareness

Balance

Connection

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Awareness

- Being attuned to one's needs, limits, emotions, and resources.
- Heed all levels of awareness & sources of information- cognitive, intuitive, and somatic.
- Practice mindfulness and acceptance.

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Awareness

- Look at your current emotional experience, assess which aspects of yourself are currently affected, look at your self-care skills and strategies, and catalogue the contributing factors that exist for you at this time.
- It is invaluable to discuss VT with colleagues.

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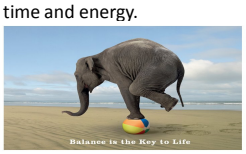
Balance

- Maintaining balance among activities, especially work, play and rest.
- Inner balance allows attention to all aspects of oneself.
- Balance is reflected in your priorities and your allocation of time and energy.



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Balance

- Balance is mainly about attitude and wholeness of experience.
- Being off-balance, or overly focused in one area of our lives, decreases our connection to our whole selves and can also prevent our full connection with others.

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Balance

- Balance is achievable, and subject to constant change and adjustment.

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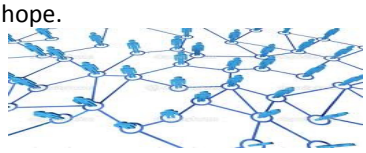
Connection

- Connection- connection to oneself, to others, and to something larger. Communication is part of connection and breaks the silence of unacknowledged pain. These connections offset isolation and increase validation and hope.



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Connection

- All of us who work with trauma survivors strive to have relationships with our coworkers that are mutually sensitive, caring, respectful and supportive.
- Strive for hope-promoting relationships.

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Connection

- While it is not appropriate to divulge details about an upsetting or stressful day at work, you can at least communicate that work was hard and that you have carried home some of the feelings and concerns raised by the events of the day. We should find ways to describe our own experience.

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Connection on the Home Front

- Attend to relationships with loved ones, even when the constraints of confidentiality mean that one can't talk about the details of one's particular work day.
- The transition from work to home may be difficult- find a ritual/symbol for the transition.

Connection to the Larger Community

- This may include a spiritual community, a political or advocacy group, or a social activity or community group purely for fun.
- Stay connected to yourself and your feelings. Make room for your spiritual experience by being aware of the larger "web" in which we exist.

Self-Care and VT

Self-Care & VT

- Self-care is attending to your physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual health.
- Self-nurture-make time for things and activities that contribute to your growth.
- Escape-in fantasy or reality- a change can give us a break and fresh perspective.

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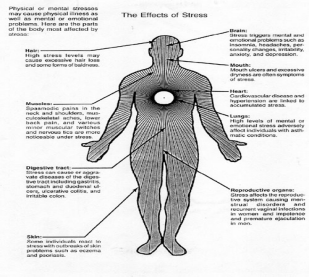
Self-Care & VT

STOP DENYING

Listen to the wisdom of your body

Begin to freely admit the stresses and pressures which have manifested physically, mentally and emotionally



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Self-Care & VT

Avoid isolation

- Don't do everything alone.
- Develop or renew intimacies with friends and loved ones. Closeness not only brings new insights, but also is an antidote to agitation and depression.

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Self-Care & VT

Change your circumstances

- Think about YOUR physical, emotional and mental well being and assess it regularly.
- Consider the demands and stresses in your life and how they affect you
- Identify the problem- is it your job, your relationship with someone, financial worries? Are superficial issues masking real or deeper issues? Once you have identifies what it is you can do something about it

Self-Care & VT

Diminish intensity in your life

- Pinpoint those areas or aspects which summon up the most concentrated intensity and work toward alleviating that pressure.
- "Collect" positive emotional thoughts- make a point of recalling the times when you experienced pleasure, comfort, tenderness, confidence or other POSITIVE emotions

Self-Care & VT

Stop over nurturing

- If you routinely take on other people's problems and responsibilities, learn to gracefully disengage by setting healthy limits and boundaries
- Treat yourself well and seek ways to nurture your own needs. Whatever it is do it just for you.
- It is important to tend to your needs first in order to have the energy and resources to help others.
- Eg. Oxygen mask on a plane.

Self-Care & VT

Learn to say "no" respectfully

- You'll help diminish intensity by speaking up for yourself.
- This may mean refusing additional requests or demands on your time and emotions. Setting healthy limits is one way to avoid becoming overwhelmed.

Self-Care & VT

Reassess your values

- Try to sort out the meaningful values from the temporary and fleeting ones; the essential from the unessential; yours from others
- You'll conserve energy and time, and begin to feel more centered.

Self-Care & VT

Learn to pace yourself

- Try to take life in moderation. You only have so much energy available.
- Ascertain what is wanted and needed in your life, then begin to balance work with love, pleasure, and relaxation.
- Set personal goals- do not be overly ambitious. Finishing the book you started or taking a short walk everyday. Whatever it is reaching it will build confidence and a sense of satisfaction

Self-Care & VT

Take care of your body

- Don't skip meals, abuse yourself with rigid diets, disregard your need for sleep, or break your doctor appointments.
- Take care of yourself nutritionally and exercise regularly.

Self-Care & VT

Diminish worry and anxiety

- Try to keep superstitious worrying to a minimum- it changes nothing. You'll have a better grip on your situation if you spend less time worrying and more time taking care of your real needs.

Self-Care & VT

Keep your sense of humor

- It has been said that humor is the antidote to vicarious traumatization.
- Life can get pretty serious at time so when you hear or see something that makes you laugh or smile, SHARE IT!
- Begin to "collect" happy and joyful moments in your life.

Self Care Activities

- Massage
- Reflexology
- EMDR
- Walking
- Reading
- Journalling
- Exercise
- Laughing
- Spending time with friends
- Travelling
- Painting
- Energy Medicine
- Music

The Value of Teamwork

- Create a team with colleagues
- Develop and adhere to team guidelines
- Non-judgmental
- Support
- Feedback
- Problem solve
- Education

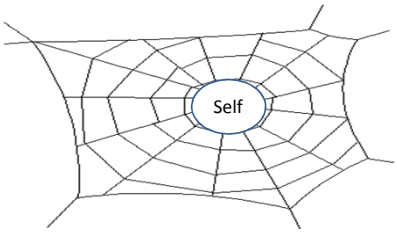
Transforming VT

- Our work with survivors is also inspiring, hopeful, and emotionally moving. We see the resilience of the human spirit and resourcefulness of the human mind.
- In order to transform VT, we need to stay aware of both parts: devastation and resilience, hurt and healing, despair and hope.

Transforming VT

- Create Meaning
- Infuse Current Activities with New Meaning
- Challenge Negative Beliefs and Assumptions
- Participate in Community-Building Activities.

My Connection Web



We cannot do this work in isolation. In order to nurture ourselves it is important to identify our supports and connections to others.
This web is our trauma membrane that helps protect us from vicarious trauma. Identify your supports and use the web when you find yourself withdrawing and isolating from your family, friends and colleagues.

Questions