Vicarious Trauma for Front-Line Service Providers & Parents

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What will be Covered

• Definition of vicarious trauma and its importance
• The impact of self-care on both personal and professional lives
• The role of stress with respect to self-care
• Strategies that reduce stress at home and at work while promoting self care (practical skills!)
• Key related concepts (toxic stress, brain architecture, serve & return)
• Ways to begin building a trauma-informed environment
The Dalai Lama on Self Care

‘In dealing with those who are undergoing great suffering, if you feel “burnout” setting in, if you feel demoralized and exhausted, it is best, for the sake of everyone, to withdraw and restore yourself. The point is to have a long-term perspective.’
What are your reactions, thoughts, or feelings when you hear “self-care”, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, burnout, stress,...?
Why Self-Care is Ignored

- Most days, the amount of energy devoted to others’ needs far exceeds any energy directed to own well-being.
- Demands of work and family – sandwich generation
- Many people simply do not know what would help them. They know something is missing, but can’t put their finger on just what might make them feel better.
- Many helping professionals believe they somehow shouldn’t need support.
- Prolonged ignoring leads to greater risk for Vicarious Trauma
Barriers to Self Care

1. Negative feelings
2. Lack of awareness or knowledge
3. Negative self-talk, attitudes and misperceptions
4. Time or too many responsibilities
5. Perfectionism
6. Lack of support
7. Finance
8. Preoccupation with loved one’s substance abuse
Why learn (develop mindfulness) about Vicarious Trauma?

• Can provide a “check-in” process

• Importance of understanding “warning signs” because this dramatically impacts our therapeutic relationship(s)

• Can be proactive (inside-out approach) to act as role-model

• Importance of both “little t” versus “big t” trauma(s)
Why do we ignore the “signs”?
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7wmPWTnDbE
Potential Hazards of Lack of Self-Care

• Depression
• Anxiety
• Emotional Depletion
• Isolation
• Disrupted Relationships
• Children-related Issues
• Sense of Helplessness or Ineffectiveness
• Bio-psycho-social difficulties
1. **Empathy:** Empathy is needed to care for traumatized children but if you over-empathize or over-identify with clients, you place yourselves at risk for internalizing the children's trauma.

2. **Insufficient Recovery Time:** Case workers may hear similar, horrific stories over and over again, often seven days a week, without the respite needed to heal or to get some distance from the stories. Thus, an accumulated secondary trauma load builds and can lead to CF.

3. **Unresolved Personal Trauma:** Many of us have had traumatic experiences in our own lives. (e.g., loss of a family member, childhood abuse or neglect, accidents, addiction or mental illness in parents, serious illness or disability in family of origin, immigration trauma and others).
How Can I Check Up on Myself (a tool for self and others)?

  
  [http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/students/self-care/documents/plan/Self-Care_Assessment.pdf](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/students/self-care/documents/plan/Self-Care_Assessment.pdf)
  
  - Physical Self Care
  - Psychological Self Care
  - Emotional Self Care
  - Spiritual Self Care
  - Relationship Self Care
  - Workplace Self Care
  - Overall
Types of Stress

• POSITIVE STRESS/EUSTRESS
  • The “good stress”
  • motivating

• NEGATIVE STRESS/DISTRESS/TOXIC STRESS
  • Too much to cope with
  • No relief in sight
  • “Overload to the System”
What is “Vicarious Trauma”

❖ Term coined by McCann and Pearlmann (1990)

OTHER RELATED TERMINOLOGY:

- Compassion Fatigue
- Secondary Trauma
- “Burn Out”
- Secondary Stress Disorder
- “Karōshi”
  - Medical cause: heart attack and stroke due to stress
Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

- Neglected self-care and lifestyle barriers
- Loss of hope
- High responsibility with low ‘power’ or high (-) outcomes
- Own past unresolved trauma(s)...ACES
  - minimization
- + illusion without accurate feedback
- Tendency toward guilt
- Poor/unclear boundaries
- Working with high needs/competing demands
- Potential therapeutic ‘double-bind’
The “Wounded Healer”

• Term created by Carl Jung

• The “analyst”/helper is compelled to treat patients because s/he is “wounded” himself/herself.

• Research (Barr, 2006) has shown that approximately 74% of counselors and therapists have experienced one or more wounding experiences, often leading to career choice

• Importance to understand Transference and Countertransference Principles as well as catharsis
  • Bearing witness to another’s trauma is part of the healing process
Impact of our Childhood

Looking at Ourselves....

• What was our “template”?  
  – The Core Story  
  – How Brains are Built

• Understanding ACES
How Brains are Built
(and applying this to those you help)

THE CORE STORY (AFWI)

• BRAIN ARCHITECTURE
• TOXIC STRESS
• SERVE & RETURN

The Brain 101

• **Model from Dr. Daniel Siegel**

  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD-lfP1FBFk

- **BRAINSTEM**
  - Automatic; not something you control
  - Reptilian Brain (Fight/Flight/Freeze/Fall)

- **LIMBIC SYSTEM**
  - Mammalian Brain
  - Emotional Memory (which gets “toxified” by stress)

- **NEO-CORTEX**
  - Separates us from animals
  - Flexible Thinking; Executive Functioning
A Word about “Mirror Neurons”

• **What are they?**
  – Neurons that fire both when an animal acts, and when the animal observes the same action performed by another.
    • More research required in this area
    • Speculation that these neurons might be important for:
      • understanding other peoples’ actions,
      • Learning new skills (imitating)
      • Involved with one’s ability to display empathy
What Does Toxic Stress Do to The Brain...AND attachment?

- Dr. Michael Meaney animal studies
  - Negative impacts associated with trauma and attachment
  - Key Concept: “more cuddles, less stress!”

“ The single most important factor determining the quality of mother-offspring interactions is the mental and physical health of the mother...”

(2004, Bulletin of the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development)
Importance of Understanding Trauma and Attachment & Brain Biology

• **TRAUMA** (the children and families with whom you work)

• **THE BRAIN IN A NUTSHELL**
  – (bottom up versus top down)
  – Significant to understand for treatment/intervention
  – Need to understand child at a deep level

• **IMPLICATIONS FOR WHAT YOU DO DAY TO DAY**

• **TRAUMA INFORMED CARE** (for self and others)
The ACE Study (www.acestudy.org)

- Study involved CDC and Kaiser (10 Questions)
- 1998- (Felitti, Anda, et al)

**SUMMARY:**

- Adverse childhood experiences are relatively common
- Childhood trauma(s) can negatively impair the “architecture” of the brain
- Correlation b/w care-givers and children
- Toxic Stress during developing years increase likelihood of significant long-term health, social and behavioral problems
So...what can I do? (personally, professionally...)

- The goal is not necessarily to eliminate...but rather, to mindfully manage the symptoms.
So...?...What Can I do?

• Same principles apply to self and to others

• HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES...
At Work

- Training and education
- Manageable caseloads
- Peer Support
- Paperwork days versus client days (carve out)
- Regular Breaks
- Inclusion – be a part of decision process
“Outside the Box” Take-Aways

• Celebrations
• Highlight Positive Experiences
• Renewal retreats
• Office ‘Cleansing Parties’
• Recognize each other
Work Towards a Trauma-Informed Environment

- Awareness of environment (physical as well as subtleties)
- Starts immediately upon hiring
- Non-harassment Policies & anti-violence training
  - Effective and accountable
- Empower staff (empower oneself)
- Training
- Ongoing Support (1:1 as well as group)
Self-Care Strategies

• **Mind the Body**
  – Eat a healthy diet
  – Get adequate sleep
  – Engage in aerobic exercise
  – Participate in physical touch such as being held or holding others
  – Utilize massage or other alternative healing practices
  – Foster conscious breathing
  – Acquire self-regulation skills
• Who is your network of support?
• Who can you count on in times of crisis?
• Who can you vent to when you have a bad day? Hour? Week? Month?
• How can they help you and your family?
Strategies for Self-Care

• **Keep it simple.** Make life choices that fit your family. Develop consistent routines. Create a safe environment

• **Stop comparing yourself to other adults and families.** They do not live your life, and they are not raising your children

• **Know which part of the day is the hardest and have a plan to make it go more smoothly.** If getting ready for school is rough, prepare as much as you can the night before.

• Join a support group.

• Get a good therapist!

• Don’t wait to ask for help!
Strategies To Avoid Burnout

• **Have down time every day.** Maybe it’s a morning walk. It might be 10 minutes with the paper and a good cup of coffee.

• **Routinely have something to which you can look forward.** Maybe it’s coffee with a neighbor after the kids are at school.

• **Accentuate the positive.** It may not be easy, but as you step back to evaluate how you and the family are doing, find time to laugh at the silly situations that come up.

• If you can find a balance between your job and/or caring for your children and meeting your own needs, you will ultimately be much better equipped to do both.
Mindfulness

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?
• Mindfulness is developing an awareness for or paying attention to what is going on in a particular moment
• It is an experience which promotes a connection with the experiences of our world in a specific moment
• It allows awareness of our thoughts, sensations, and feelings and promotes the ability to see, feel, and understand things as they are, not as we want them or think them to be
• It allows us to think differently about situations and devote the appropriate resources to respond (e.g., time and energy to choose how to act)
Mindfulness and Stress Reduction

When paying attention to how we are in any given moment:
• we can **actively choose** how we are going to respond to our current internal and external stressors
• we are **empowered** to have some control over the stressors we are experiencing
• we can actively choose to enact strategies to reduce our stress reaction
Lao Tzu (6th Century BC, Chinese Philosopher)

“ If you are depressed, you are living in the Past. If you are anxious, living in the Future. If you are at peace, you are living in the moment.”
BAD JOKE!!!

- Past, Present, and Future Walked into a Bar...
Relaxation

- Progressive Relaxation
- Methods to promote calm and well-being
- May involve meditation, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, visualization
- Relaxation helps to slow down our internal processes (e.g., thinking, feeling, acting) which allows us space from our stressors and a chance to recharge our coping resources
Learning the ABCs of CBT!
Thoughts/Feelings/Actions – easier said than done?

• Dr. David Burns (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy – “CBT”)
• Albert Ellis (Rational Emotive)

❖ Practice...practice...practice
CBT 101: “The A-B-Cs”

**A: ANTECEDANT/ACTIVATING EVENT**
- “Triggers”/”Buttons”
- Negative Internal Dialogue

**B: BEHAVIOR OR BELIEF**
- Anger Outburst
- Moodiness
- I HAVE to keep doing this...
- No one else can do this like me...
- Etc...
CBT (Cont’d)

**C:** CONSEQUENCE(S)

- Depression
- Hopelessness
- Panic/Anxiety
- No Hope
- Anger Management Concerns (try to get “control”)
- Etc., etc........

**Vicarious Trauma?**
CBT Framework for Change

- When you become aware of the stressors/triggers as well as the Internal Dialogue, you have the ability to mindfully act and make a decision to change it.
Useful Metaphors: The power of narrative storytelling

• Africa and Indian Legend
  – “How to Catch a Monkey”

• Cherokee Legend of Grandfather teaching young child
  – “Grandfather Tells”
  – Also known as “The Wolves Within”
Questions?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR VALUABLE TIME!!
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