

VICARIOUS TRAUMA TIP SHEET FOR COMMUNITY-BASED VICTIM SERVICE WORKERS

Vicarious trauma is an unintended consequence of caring for and attending to trauma survivors. It is “the inner transformation that occurs in the inner experiences of the therapist that comes about as a result of empathic engagement with clients’ trauma material” - Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995; p. 31).

A few indicators that a community-based victim service worker may be experiencing vicarious trauma are: sleeplessness, free floating irritation, feeling trapped by your work, hopelessness associated with your work/clients, diminished

sense of satisfaction, rejecting physical or emotional closeness, avoidance of working with certain clients, detachment and exhaustion. For a more thorough list of indicators, you may consult <https://www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf>

In addition to experiencing vicarious trauma, CBVS workers may experience secondary stress or secondary traumatic stress. CBVS workers may experience reactions that mirror the reactions of survivors to the original trauma. When experiencing secondary

stress, a CBVS worker may experience flashbacks of clients’ experiences, intrusive thoughts of client material and intrusive dreams, sleep disturbance and overall fear (Bellicoso, 2017).

The experience of vicarious trauma is not an indictment of our lack of self-care. Self-care alone will not protect us from the impacts of repetitive exposure to traumatic material, although it is the foundation from which we will nourish and protect ourselves. It is imperative that we adopt processes for ourselves that both protect and replenish us within the workplace (Kearney, 2018).

Specific Considerations:

Our own trauma history, mental health baseline and intersecting identities interact with the role we hold as CBVS workers in providing us with both unique resiliencies and vulnerabilities. Although many of us have done significant personal work before entering into the field of trauma response, it is important to stay open to moving in and out of our own personal counselling during our tenure as a CBVS worker. Trigger points of our own trauma history may be brought to the surface, or the cumulative effect of exposure to others' trauma and the lack of justice for survivors may increase feelings of depression and anxiety.

New CBVS workers are particularly vulnerable to vicarious trauma as they are viscerally exposed to trauma stories they may not have previously heard, and concurrently hold a responsibility to assist a survivor in navigating through multiple systems which may not be as responsive to the survivor or be as trauma-informed as we would like. New CBVS workers may feel intimidated by the criminal justice system and find their previously held ideals of justice challenged. More experienced CBVS workers are also particularly vulnerable to vicarious trauma as the cumulative experience of years of witnessing, absorption and the wearing down of formal support



systems and resources take a toll.

A unique impact of providing court accompaniment and support at interviews with Crown Counsel is being exposed to traumatic detail, and having to be still and quiet while this exposure occurs. Passively receiving trauma narratives may result in a deeper absorption of the intensity of these experiences, and require more conscious releasing once the court is adjourned and the CBVS worker is no longer in the role of supporting the client/witness. Please see releasing impacts in the remedies section for a variety of techniques that can assist in discharging this energy.

Workers have the responsibility of being “the bearer of bad news” and witnessing survivors’ despair, outrage or hopelessness when

informing them of denial of protective orders, delays in the progression of their case, and/or failures to lay charges or to convict. This leaves workers with the responsibility of witnessing and supporting, when we ourselves may be holding the same reactions. CBVS workers intersect with systems within the criminal justice field and family law sector which we may feel unable to influence in meaningful ways. The inability to be an agent of change may result in feelings of powerlessness and helplessness.

Please remember that although you yourself may not be able to bring a sense of justice to the survivor, your belief in them, your willingness to stand with them as they experience the legal systems, and your work on their behalf to increase their access to resources (protection orders,



counselling, etc.) validates their experience and conveys that their suffering matters, and that their emergence into healing is within their power. It may be helpful to focus on where our support effects change or meaning, rather than where we do not hold influence.

Many CBVS workers work in agencies in which they are the sole CBVS worker, which fosters isolation. Working within a smaller community increases our isolation as we may find we reduce our involvement in our community to avoid overlapping with survivors we have served or their family members.

Remedies:

- **Personal Resilience and Self-care:** Ensure your foundation of self-care is intact and robust. Our foundation always includes good nutrition,

good sleep, regular physical exertion, regular contact with nature, loving connection with others and spiritual connection. If you are unsure about the quality of your self-care, or need some rejuvenation in that area, access one of the assessments listed below to check in with yourself and get new ideas.

- **Releasing Impacts:**

When attending court with a survivor, carry with you sensory tools that they (and you) may use during the long, anxiety-provoking waits. It is particularly beneficial to have something subtle both of you may hold in your pockets during court. Choose items that can be easily sanitized, and keep them in baggies to offset any concern of contamination. Talking may be more natural and smoother in that more

grounded and emotionally regulated internal space while you both are benefitting from having simple sensory movement through a fidget toy, clay or colouring. Participating in a subtle sensory activity alongside a survivor helps them feel less vulnerable to participate. You may find it surprising how much more grounded and resourced you feel engaging in this activity.

- When a work day or meeting has had significant impact on you, take fifteen to twenty minutes at the end of your day to sit with a blank piece of paper and colour, scribble, or jot a few words down on what you are holding or carrying from the day. Approach the paper as your container for what you have absorbed. Continue scribbling or colouring until you feel quiet inside, then fold the paper up repeatedly until you cannot fold it any longer. Either discard it right away, or write what you are invoking for yourself as your super power, self-care, or reminder that you can be well on the outside of the folded paper, and then let the paper go.

- When a particular survivor continues to enter into your thoughts, offer loving kindness (or metta) meditation for them as a way of offering something beyond your office, but also for yourself. The teaching of loving kindness meditation is that we start with offering kindness to ourselves, then the person who is occupying our energy,

and then out into the world to all beings (including our animal friends).

<https://positivepsychology.com/loving-kindness-meditation/>

- Exposure to traumatic material lodges in our bodies and nervous systems. Resetting our vagus nerve (and thus stimulating our parasympathetic nervous system) throughout our workdays can assist in offsetting vicarious trauma. Simple actions like humming for two minutes, laughing out loud, or creating saliva from sucking on a strong mint or cinnamon can all stimulate your vagus nerve. For more strategies, consult https://drarielleschwartz.com/the-vagus-nerve-in-trauma-recovery-dr-arielle-schwartz/#.X_Inn-B7lQI

- A simple four-and-a-half minute body practice that can assist in bringing your amygdala out of a false danger signal and stimulate your vagus nerve is described by trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem in an interview with Krista Tippett from On Being at <https://onbeing.org/blog/race-and-healing-body-practice/>

- **Awareness:** Remember the ABC's of offsetting vicarious trauma: **A:** awareness **C:** connection. **B:** balance. Awareness invites us to have mini-rituals in our scheduled work time, where we are attuning to ourselves and our



needs in that moment, and the impact of the day thus far. Each bathroom break can be your tuning in time, the washing of hands a washing off of energy you have absorbed. Awareness also includes noticing and attending to the ways in which vicarious trauma is impacting or eroding your sense of self, the world, and safety. To enhance your awareness, it may be helpful to commit to completing a formal assessment of your wellbeing at least annually (numerous assessments are listed under resources on this sheet).

Designate one person you trust who is close to you in your intimate, personal life to be your “canary in the coal mine”. Educate that person about vicarious trauma, and ask them to give you a heads up when they see indicators of you being eroded by your work.

- **Balance:** From a workplace perspective, balance includes paying attention to your scheduling and caseload. If possible, schedule your more challenging clients during your more resourced time of day. Scheduling time for reflection, note taking, and phone calls is a proactive way of protecting your energy in order to reduce the sense of always feeling time-crunched. You may find it helpful to schedule time at the end of your day for wrapping up your day – not for client interaction. If you work with other CBVS workers and have a number of survivors on your caseload who are intensely in crisis, suicidal, etc., pay attention to that and seek permission to bypass another intake who presents in that way to seek more balance in your caseload. Similarly, pay attention to the number of court cases you have coming up and, if possible, discuss pacing your acceptance of intakes to allow sufficient



room for the increased contact with survivors that occurs close to court dates, and the unavailability that will occur over court days.

- **Connection:** Means ensuring you are not isolating from your office colleagues, but also having connection to others who are not immersed in trauma work. Connection to spirit, land, creative expression and healthy, vibrant, intact others helps us balance out the exposure our work creates.
- Identify a colleague from your office or another CBVS program who you will have in person or virtual lunch with every week. Have a set, repeating lunch appointment where you meet in private to just talk and eat.
- Follow or join in with local, provincial, national, global activism against violence against women and children. Become attached to something larger than yourself; we are part of a vital global, active community, and rabble

rousing is a strong antidote to the pessimism and helplessness we can feel. One source of this activism is the United Nations, who since 2013 has been promoting 16 days annually to protest gender- based violence. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/take-action/16-days-of-activism>

RESOURCES:

There is no quantitative assessment that measures vicarious trauma. Several assessments that are useful for measuring impacts are:

Professional Quality of Life Measure (2009) is a self assessment that measures compassion satisfaction, burnout and secondary trauma. Available in multiple languages: http://www.proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html

A **Burnout** self-test can be found on the Mind Tools website: <https://www.mindtools.com/>

pages/article/newTCS_08.htm

Silencing Response Scale

(Baranowsky 1996, 1998) is a self assessment that measures the impact of communication with trauma survivors on our ability to be present and emotionally resourced: http://www.compassionstrengths.com/Silencing_Response.html

Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (Bride et al. 2004) is a self assessment that measures impact of exposure to client's traumatic material: <https://theacademy.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/STSSwithscoreinterpretation.pdf>

Compassion Fatigue/ Satisfaction Self Test

(Stamm 2013) based on the work of Charles Figley is an opportunity to measure levels of fatigue versus satisfaction derived from one's work: <https://nwdrugtaskforce.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Compassion-Fatigue-Handout-6.pdf>

Mental Health Continuum Model for First Responders is a simple and clear continuum that assists in identifying the nature of impact or injury to your mental health from the exposure of your work and/or life events: <https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MentalHealthContinuumModel-1.pdf>

Self-care Patterns Scale (SCPS-R) (Gonzalez, Leeds &

Knipe, 2012) is an assessment to see how robust your self-care is in action and attitude: <http://www.intra-tp.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/SELF-CARE-SCALE-with-Interpretation.pdf>

Another **Self-care Assessment** was adapted based on the work of Saakvitne, Pearlman, & Staff of TSI/CAAP (1996). An alternative way to use the assessment is to read the self-care activities and identify those you have left behind that you wish to return to, or to incorporate new self-care activities into your routines: <https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/content/dam/socialwork/home/self-care-kit/self-care-assessment.pdf>

Further guides and assessments based on the work of Saakvitne, Pearlman, & Staff of TSI is the self-care and resilience wheels created by Olga Phoenix. The self-care wheel outlines self-care in six areas of our lives, and comes with an assessment wheel and goal wheel, available at: <https://olgaphoenix.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SCWsWDmin.pdf>

And the resilience toolkit provides helpful information on how to build resilience

focusing on self-care, relationships and living with purpose, available at: <https://olgaphoenix.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Resilience-Wheel-Toolkit.pdf>

Post traumatic growth is a concept that examines the positive changes within us due to the exposure to other's suffering. For more information see: <https://positivepsychology.com/post-traumatic-growth/> (includes several videos.)

The inventory itself can be accessed at: <https://www.careinnovations.org/wp-content/uploads/Post-Traumatic-Growth-Inventory.pdf>

Tara Brach has developed a mindful emotional awareness process entitled RAIN that allows practitioners to safely connect to feeling, develop awareness, nourish oneself and release. For materials and guidance on this process visit: <https://www.tarabrach.com/rain/>

Guidebook on Vicarious Trauma: Recommended Solutions for Anti-Violence Workers, Richardson, J. (2001): https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/os_vicarious_trauma_guidebook-508.pdf

Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk, 2009. If you wish to view a 20-minute talk by van Dernoot Lipsky, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOzDGrcvmus>

On Being Podcast with Krista Tippett, a weekly broadcast that explores active spirituality and self-care in our current world. Justice making, and wholistic care features in her interviews. Of particular note is starting points and care packages, broadcasts that promote practices to support those exposed to hurt: <https://onbeing.org/series/podcast/>

Behind the Line Podcast with Lindsay Faas, a Lower Mainland clinical counsellor who specializes in trauma. The podcast is focused on wellness for front line responders and trauma: <https://www.my.thrive-life.ca/behind-the-line>

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