Preventing, Recognizing & Addressing Vicarious Trauma

A Tool for Primary Health Care Organizations and Providers
Working With Individuals

Anyone in a health or social service role will encounter suffering, and we know that hearing traumatic stories every day can be taxing.

Providers often feel helpless in the face of this suffering, and how complex people's lives can be - there are rarely "easy fixes."

Understanding the nature and effects of vicarious trauma can be a first step in preventing, recognizing and dealing with it.

What is Vicarious Trauma?

Also known as secondary traumatic stress (STS) or compassion fatigue (CF), vicarious trauma is a negative reaction to trauma exposure and includes a range of symptoms that are similar to experiencing trauma directly. Vicarious trauma is common but there are ways to prevent it and limit it's impacts.

"When I get home, I can't stop thinking about what happened at work."

"Sometimes it's hard to hear what my patients have to say."

The first step is prevention. All health care and social service providers are exposed to suffering, but some settings have better supports than others.

Preventing, Recognizing & Addressing Vicarious Trauma
This tool offers actions you can take to implement equity oriented harm reduction in your primary health care practice. Harm reduction, cultural safety, and trauma & violence informed care (TVIC) are interrelated concepts that can help promote equity.

For other tools in the toolkit, see: https://equiphealthcare.ca/toolkit

Trauma & Violence Informed Care

Harm Reduction

Cultural Safety

Steps to Preventing, Recognizing & Addressing Vicarious Trauma

To move your practice toward equity-oriented harm reduction

1 **TAKE STOCK** of your work environment. Do the conditions of your work increase or decrease the likelihood of vicarious trauma having a negative impact? Consider:

- Does your workload allow you to provide good care, with adequate breaks?
- How is human suffering acknowledged and dealt with?
- How are providers expected to act in the face of suffering? Tough? Distant? Compassionate?
- Is reflective supervision from a manager or team leader formally available?
- Are staff encouraged to debrief informally amongst themselves, perhaps using a "buddy system"?
- How are providers who are struggling supported? Are people seen as "burned out" (an individual's weakness and problem) or "used up" by the organizational practices?
- How is workplace violence - including between staff or client or staff-client/client-staff - acknowledged and dealt with?

2 **BE AWARE** of the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma and how to recognize them in both yourself and your co-workers:

- Social withdrawal
- Extreme or rapid changes in emotions (e.g., involuntary crying)
- Aggression
- Increased sensitivity to violence
- Physical symptoms (e.g., aches, pains)
- Sleep difficulties
- Intrusive imagery
- Cynicism
- Difficulty managing boundaries with clients
- Relationship difficulties

3 **IF YOU'RE CONCERNED** take an online self-test, such as the one here: http://www.compassionfatigue.org/pages/selftest.html

4 **PRACTICE SELF-CARE.** Whether for prevention or treatment of vicarious trauma, focusing on self-care is a good idea. Anyone who works in a helping profession is at risk. If you are not having these experiences currently, it's important to take steps to keep yourself well.

Everyone is different, but self-care might look like:

- Exercise (of any kind)
- Relaxation
- Mindfulness practice
- Meditation
- Healthy diet
- Adequate sleep
- Spending time in nature
- Spending time with friends & family
- Volunteering in areas where sustainable change is evident
- Limiting intake of violent movies/books

5 **ADVOCATE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT.**
Importantly, individual providers cannot be responsible for preventing or dealing with the effects of vicarious trauma. Doing so requires a culture of support, which means a team effort from the individual to unit to organizational level, and adequate resources to provide good care. Work toward this culture of support by engaging leaders, direct care staff, auxiliary staff, and clients.

Anyone who works in a helping profession is at risk for vicarious trauma.

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The Gender, Trauma & Violence Knowledge Incubator @ Western University (GTV Incubator) is a collective of researchers, community service leaders, educators and trainees committed to gender, trauma and violence research, policy and practice.

For more info visit GTVIncubator.uwo.ca