

Preventing Vicarious Trauma and Promoting Self-Care in Judges, Attorneys, and Law Students Working with Traumatized Individuals



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Outline of topics to be discussed



1. Challenges faced in working with trauma survivors
2. Vicarious trauma: What is it?
How to prevent or ameliorate?
3. Promoting self-care





“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and **not** be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to **walk through water without getting wet.**”

(Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.)

*Clinical Professor of Family and Community Medicine at UCSF
School of Medicine and the Founder/Director of the
[Institute for the Study of Health and Illness](#) at Commonweal*

Daniela: Reveals death of her son to her attorney



Daniela* is a 25-year-old Guatemalan woman. She fled from Guatemala last year after suffering from severe psychological, physical and sexual abuse from her husband, a police officer, since the night they married when she was 17. Her husband beat her several days a week, breaking her arms and ribs. Once he threw burning oil on her back. He raped her many times and threatened to kill her. Daniela went several times to the police but officers told her that they would not interfere in a domestic dispute. Eventually Daniela fled to another Guatemalan city but her husband hunted her down. When you meet with Daniela you sense that she is holding back something. Eventually she blurts out that she fled secretly to the United States with her 1-year-old son Carlos but when she was crossing the Rio Grande, her son drowned. “What kind of a mother am I? I killed my son!”

*A fictitious case

Daniella's attorney faces several challenges:



- **Difficult to witness Daniella's extreme distress – not knowing what to say**
- **Trigger's memories of losses the attorney experienced (loss of own child or imagining what that would be like)**
- **How to gather the details of trauma / given urge to avoid (by Daniella and by the attorney)**
- **Witnessing Daniella relive her trauma over and over – as prepare Daniella to tell her story in court**
- **Images of drowning of Carlos in attorney's dreams**

Working with Traumatized Clients: Challenging Factors



- Traumatic and sometimes gruesome nature of facts (particularly if you have been through something similar):

✓ domestic violence	✓ death of loved one
✓ child abuse	✓ torture
✓ murder	✓ death threats
✓ rape	✓ _____

- Extreme distress of your client:
 - ✓ not knowing how to handle their distress;
 - ✓ interferes with your being able to gather facts or with their ability to assist in the preparation of their case;
 - ✓ Stimulates your emotions – painful and hard to remain professional

Challenging Individual, Life Situational, and Organizational Factors



- Uncertainty
- Things we don't have control over, including:
 - ✓ resources and support available for work chronically outweighed by the demands
 - ✓ client/work demands regularly encroach on personal time
 - ✓ _____
- Increased demand for our services
- Impact of changing laws
- Individual vulnerabilities: e.g., own history of trauma; health problems; substance use; depression or anxiety

How might this affect us?

Questions I often ask attorneys to reflect on:



1. If you represented Daniela, or another trauma survivor, what might you experience in your meetings if she becomes distraught?
 - What might your thoughts be?
 - How might you feel?
 - What might you experience in your body?
2. What would it be like for you if Daniela: (1) keeps asking you if you could ensure that she didn't have to go back home? or (2) if she will win her case?
3. What might help you to be able to tolerate and contain any distress you might feel so that you can continue to fulfill your professional role?

What is Vicarious Trauma?



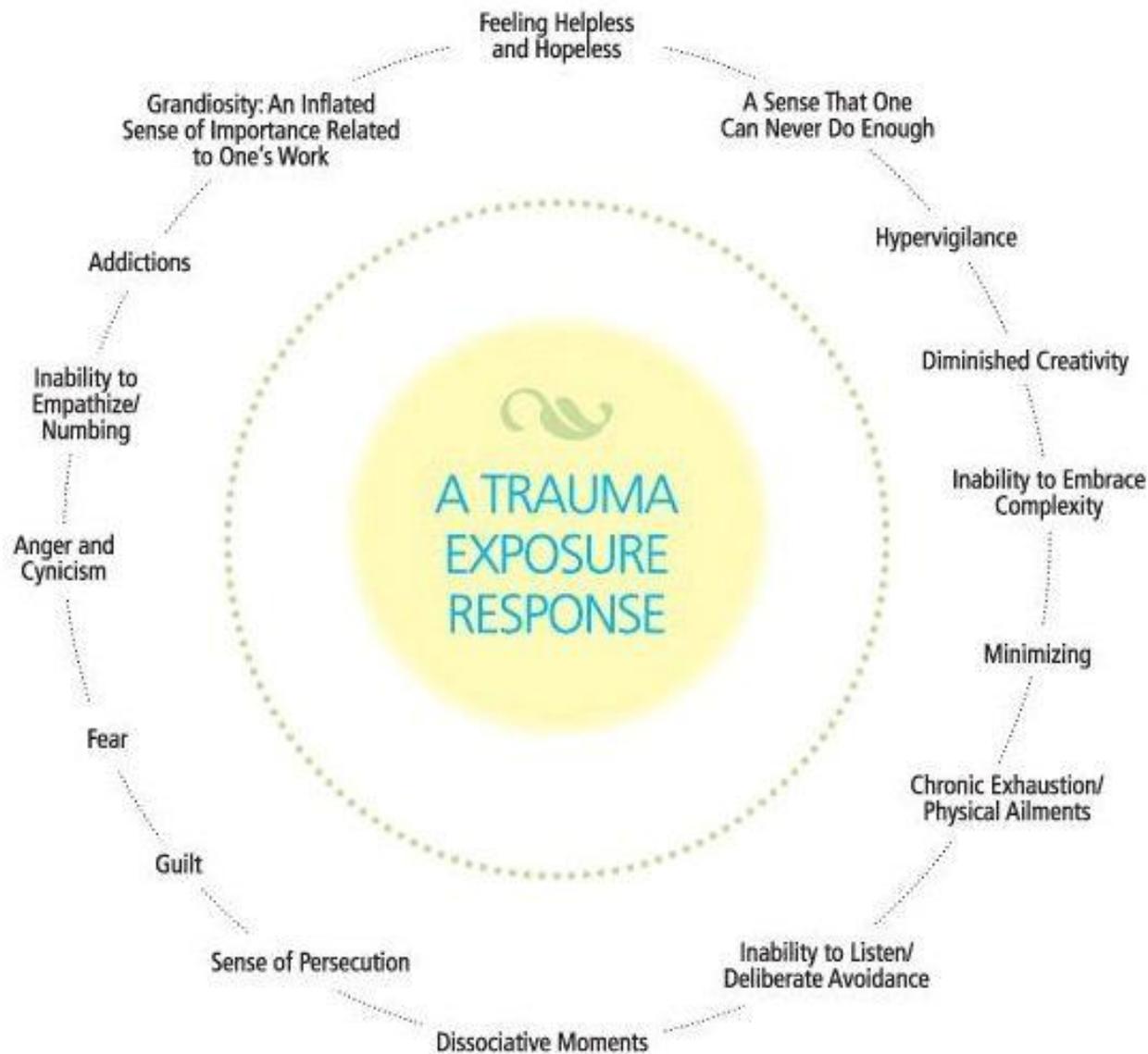
- Potential **behavioral and emotional reactions** to working with traumatized individuals (may mirror symptoms of PTSD & depression experienced by your clients)
- Impact from a buildup of **exposure to clients' trauma**. Is often cumulative in nature but can come on suddenly.
- **Transformation of your world view** as a result of working with those who have experienced trauma, and from seeing the suffering of others. (often a result of **over-empathizing without adequate boundaries**)
- **Neurological basis**: mirror neuron network & sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight response)

Trauma Exposure Response

A trauma exposure response may be defined as the transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings or the planet.

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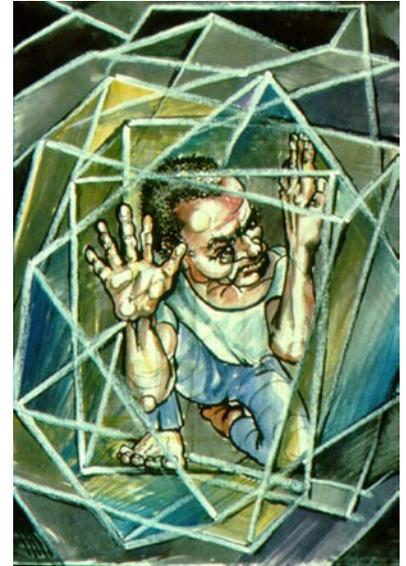
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Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Traumatization

General changes:

- No time or energy for oneself
- Disconnection from loved ones
- Social withdrawal; ability to trust
- Increased sensitivity to violence
- Sense of personal safety and control
- Cynicism
- Generalized despair and hopelessness
- sense of powerlessness and disruption



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Indicators of VT (continued)

- Difficulty concentrating during meeting w/ client. Spacing out
- Hoping your client will not show up to the mtg.
- Arriving late to meet client
- Stop reading/watching news
- Stop exercising or going out with friends
- Thinking about or visualizing the story you have heard (interferes with functioning)
- Nightmares of client traumas
- Feeling numb / like a robot
- Increased worry re: low likelihood events (plane crash)
- Being extra cautious when leaving the building
- Feel uncharacteristically sad, depressed, or out of sorts
- Feel uncharacteristically impatient or angry with others
- Use drugs or alcohol to cope
- How can I carry on with my daily life when my client's life has been so disrupted by trauma?
- Maybe I should change careers.
- ...

A Self-Assessment Tool (vicarious/secondary trauma, compassion satisfaction, and burnout):

Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) – scale and scoring information:

https://proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL_5_English_Self-Score_3-2012.pdf

Vicarious trauma is not inevitable nor does it have to last forever

- Vicarious trauma can be very disruptive & distressing
- Rare to develop full-blown vicarious trauma
- Vicarious trauma can be prevented
- It can be addressed and overcome
- One can achieve vicarious transformation as well

Vicarious Resilience (VR)...



- is the process of professionals learning about **overcoming adversity** from the trauma survivors they work with (not so likely unless work with person over time)
- the resulting **positive transformation** and **empowerment** in those professionals through their **empathic engagement with** the stories of trauma and resilience of their clients (like VT but in a positive healing direction)
- You may well have experienced (or may experience) **positive effects** from doing this work

What is Self-Care?



- **The ability to maintain physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health in times of stress.** (<http://beta.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/podcasts-selfcare-dbhresponders-presentation.pdf>)
- **The ability to:**
 - ✓ Engage in work with traumatized clients **without sacrificing other important parts of one's life;**
 - ✓ Maintain a **positive attitude** towards the work despite challenges.

“Self-care can also be understood as a practitioner’s right to be well, safe, and fulfilled.” (New Tactics on-line tactical dialogue on Self-Care for activists (Sept 2010): <http://www.newtactics.org/search/node/self-care>)

Research Based Suggestions/Strategies



- Recognize the **risks** for yourself
- Find a way to **debrief** distressing material / peer support / supervision on cases
- Work on **self-awareness** every day (develop an early warning system)
- Take an inventory of how **balanced** your life is – be intentional about balancing it out
- Evaluate your **tension reducing behaviors**
- Be intentional about **protecting yourself**
- **Maintaining connection** with others and with things that bring you joy and sustain you.

Strategies (continued)



- the **Big 3**:
 - getting enough sleep
 - eating healthy food
 - getting regular exercise: e.g., taking a walk
- **meditating / mindfulness**
- connecting with what is **meaningful** to you about your work
- **setting limits / boundaries**: recognizing that the trauma survivors we serve will have many problems that we cannot do anything about (focus on what you can do while validating their reality, no matter how hard).
- Remind yourself: **I matter!** I deserve to be healthy & well.

Regular Check Ins: Reassessing and Revisiting Your Plan



Self-Care Self-Assessment

Assessment Worksheet covers:

- (1) physical self-care;
- (2) psychological self-care;
- (3) emotional self-care;
- (4) spiritual self-care; and
- (5) workplace or professional self-care

Retrieved from: <https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/content/dam/socialwork/home/self-care-kit/self-care-assessment.pdf>

Saakvitne KW, Pearlman LA, & Staff of TSI/CAAP. *Transforming the pain: A workbook on vicarious traumatization*. New York: Norton; 1996.

Organizational Strategies/Responsibilities



- Important to have understanding of vicarious trauma and **buy-in / commitment from the top** to the well-being of employees
- Provide opportunity for **balance** of types of cases and assignments
- Develop **mentoring** program – supervision & debriefing
- Support **employee wellness** programs
- Support **ongoing professional development** / continuing education to improve knowledge and capacities for self-care



Questions and Comments

Thank you!



Image from: <http://bitesizewellness.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Legs-Up-The-Wall-Yoga-Pose.jpg>