

Vicarious Trauma and Caregivers

It is critical that any crisis responder prioritize their emotional well being. To successfully work in an emotional demanding profession, one must have an understanding of the consequences of that work. It is also important for caregivers not to detach from others in order to provide the best, most compassionate aid to families in crisis. There is a delicate balance to maintain indeed!

Vicarious trauma is a natural reaction resulting from exposure to experiences and feelings of a traumatic event experienced by another person.

Vicarious trauma is:

- Not direct trauma;
- Caused by second hand exposure;
- Accrual of exposure to other people's trauma.

Vicarious trauma is also referred to as:

- Compassion fatigue;
- Secondary trauma;
- Secondary traumatic syndrome;
- Secondary traumatic stress disorder.

Vicarious trauma impacts individuals who are involved in the lives of people who have experienced a traumatic event or sudden loss. It is difficult to absorb the sadness and trauma of another person and these empathic engagements can cause fatigue and traumatic stress symptoms. The symptoms are unrelated to actual events and can be triggered by past or current personal traumatic events.

Vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue impacts service providers in the following ways:

- Coping mechanisms become overwhelmed;
- Reduces effectiveness of caregiver;
- Helplessness;
- Detachment from co-workers not involved in the work;
- Detachment from family and friends;
- Shortened tenure as service provider.

Judith Herman, in the book *Trauma and Recovery* states, "Trauma is contagious...When a (support person) experiences, to a lesser degree, similar terror, rage and despair as the victim, the phenomenon of traumatic counter transference or vicarious traumatic counter transference or vicarious traumatization occurs."

Leading writer in the area of *Compassion Fatigue*, Charles Figley, noted that, "This (traumatic counter transference) is an inevitable and normal response to working with traumatized people. Very empathic individuals are at a higher risk of being frequently and negatively impacted.

Vicarious trauma reactions resemble first-hand reactions and responses to traumatic stress including:

- Sleeping problems;
- Nightmares;
- Intrusive thoughts, memories and flashbacks;
- Hyper-vigilance;
- General anxiety and anxiety attacks;
- Isolation and disconnection
- Substance abuse and high risk behaviors;
- Changes in appetite and sex drive;
- Irritability and depression;
- Cynicism, negativity, and apathy about life and the world.

The impact of vicarious trauma can also affect an agency, faith community, or counseling group. The emotional reactions can cause staff conflict over assignments and personal and professional boundaries. The agency and faith community may see poor productivity begin to occur in a normally productive individual. The organization may experience loss of staff due to sick time and high staff turnover rates. In 2001, The Denver Post reported that 65% of the teachers who were at Columbine High School the day of the 1999 shootings were no longer teaching at Columbine and most had left the teaching profession altogether. The assumption is that their departure was related to the disaster.

Figley (1993) distinguishes caregiver burnout from compassion fatigue by pointing out that burnout primarily has to do with one's work and develops gradually. According to Figley, compassion fatigue comes on more quickly than burnout and is more responsive to solutions. Compassion fatigue may develop from over-identification with the suffering of others. It is important to train managers, responders, and crisis workers to recognize the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue.

Mitigating the Impact

Individuals who choose to work with people in crisis should assess their personal level of vulnerability to vicarious trauma based upon their current personal situation, history of emotional distress and depression, past experiences with trauma and violence, as well as the effectiveness of current support systems.

Instructions given on an airplane during safety presentations provides a good analogy for self-care. "Secure your own oxygen mask before securing the oxygen mask on your child." This is not a natural response for parents, but critical to the survival of everyone. It is also critical for helpers to take care of themselves as well.

Taking care of the Self:

A personalized self-care plan should fit into one's lifestyle, personality, resources, and interests. An effective self-care plan should address the whole person – physically, emotionally, behaviorally, and spiritually and include stress reducing activities in which a person will regularly and habitually engage.

Compassion Fatigue Prevention Steps

- Pre-incident training – have an idea of what to expect;
- Pre-incident preparation – become involved with the organizations and agencies involved in crisis response and learn their culture, policies and procedures;
- Set personal and professional boundaries and stick to them.
- Take days off;
- Time limited shifts;
- Accept duties within the scope of your experience and training;
- Develop connections with other response professionals who are able to provide appropriate support;
- Take advantage of opportunities for formal intervention during and after the interaction;
- Advocate for establishing formalized systems of promoting self-care within your work environment if these do not exist;
- Pay attention to physical needs;
- Make sure you are asking for and accepting care from your social support network;
- Participate in events that provide meaning and a sense of completion to your response efforts.

"Debriefing" is one model for addressing vicarious trauma, though there are limited empiric studies on its efficacy. There are many models, both formal and informal used to debrief responders. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing developed by the Jeffery Mitchell is one of the most frequently used crisis debriefing models for caregivers. A more detailed description can be found on their website: www.icisf.org.

Organizational Response

Organizations need to support their employees working or volunteering in emotionally demanding situations. Crisis staff and others who engage in relationships with, in particular, bereaved parents, need to be educated about vicarious trauma and its potential implications. Vicarious trauma needs to be discussed without judgment or disdain. Vicarious trauma and its potential impact needs to be understood and normalized as part of a healthy organization. An effective organization will recognize that working with victims places extraordinary demands on employees and volunteers and prioritize care for these special people.

References:

- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Figley, C. (1995). *Compassion Fatigue*. Bristol, PA., Op cit.
- Figley, C. (1995). *Compassion Fatigue*. Bristol, PA,