

Self-Care and Vicarious Trauma: What Helpers Need to Know

When we talk about self-care in the field of violence against women, we are really talking about ways to reduce the impact of vicarious trauma on ourselves as helpers. Self-care skills (such as relaxations techniques or time management) related to reducing stress and bring wellness to one's life are important to everyone. Skills related to minimizing vicarious trauma are different, but essential for people learning about or working with victims of gender violence. Minimizing vicarious trauma takes more than a bubble bath! It takes constants, insightful awareness about our own thoughts and behaviors and an open dialogue with supportive people in our lives.

What is Vicarious Trauma?

Vicarious trauma (VT) characterizes the cumulative effects of working with survivors of traumatic life events, such as rape, incest, child abuse, or domestic violence. VT is a way of framing the emotional, physical, and spiritual transformations experienced by those who work with or learn about traumatized populations. Three important things to know about VT are:

- VT manifests differently in each individual.
- VT is cumulative. The effect on helpers intensifies over time and with multiple clients.
- VT is pervasive. It affects all areas of helpers' lives, including emotions, relationships, and their views of the world.

What are the signs of VT?

Remembering that VT affects people differently, there are some common ways in which it manifests.

Feelings of vulnerability

Hearing traumatic stories can cause a helper to question their own safety and feel that they and their loved ones are vulnerable. Examples of this would be being paranoid about being followed, worrying that you children will be sexually abused, staying home more often.

Difficulty trusting

After hearing accounts of abuse within intimate relationships—through battering, acquaintance rape, and child sexual abuse—trusting someone can be difficult. Examples of this would be feeling like you are better off alone, hesitance to meet new people, questioning the behaviors of loved ones.

A changed view of the world

Interactions with traumatized people can chance a helper's ability and willingness to see the world as a good and safe place for themselves and those they love. Feelings of pessimism, cynicism, anger, hopelessness, and injustice about the world are examples. These feelings can lead to diminished empathy and resentment towards victims and isolation.

What can be done to minimize VT?

Know your A-B-C's

Awareness

Helpers need to take time to self-reflect. Journal writing, therapy, and talking with a supervisor or friend are examples of good habits that build self-awareness.

Balance

Maintaining healthy boundaries between work and home life is important. Developing non-trauma related interest and hobbies are critical. Learning to relax through meditation, quiet activities, or exercise can be emotionally restorative.

Connection

Having supportive colleagues or peers can help reduce isolation and give opportunities to share feelings or experiences. It is also an important way to develop and nurture trusting relationship.

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References for original article: "Understanding Vicarious Traumatization—Strategies for Social Workers"

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FOR MORE EDUCATION OR TO SCHEDULE A PROGRAM CONTACT:

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW HAS BEEN A VICTIM OF VIOLENCE:

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