



WALKING ALONGSIDE YOUNG PEOPLE

Acknowledging and Honoring their Individual Journeys

Vicarious Trauma and Self-Care: Practical Strategies

StreetWorks, Training 7

SUMMARY

Working in the human/social services sector can be extremely rewarding and satisfying. It can also be emotionally and physically draining. Many of us come to the work because of our own histories and desire to give back to the community. This combination of factors can lead to a normalization of chronic stress as part of our daily lives. Chronic or toxic stress, vicarious or secondary trauma and burnout affects our human and organizational systems. Learning how to recognize it, and utilizing practical tools and tips, can help create more resiliency in the sector.

KEY POINTS

- **Caregivers need to be able to model self-care for clients.** This comes through self-awareness, intentionally researching and learning self-care techniques, and constantly practicing self-care by the caregivers themselves.
- **Historical trauma can show up in the workplace.** Two common ways are through conflict avoidance and passive aggressive behavior. Agencies need to be aware of this dynamic so they are able to manage it.
- Stress and trauma impact our immune system and causes inflammation which increases chronic diseases. Stress also elevates cortisol levels which can impair many bodily functions such as sleep, memory, and can cause organ damage.
- Even vicarious trauma can put us into fight, flight or freeze mode.
- **Mirror Neurons** cause us to respond to other people's actions or emotions and to the intent behind them. Being aware of what you are mirroring to other people and recognizing how others are perceiving you can be extremely important when working with clients and co-workers.
- There are many ways that people can heal. Healing can happen through traditional western medicine and counseling, or through other avenues such as prayer, meditation, movement, or other culturally meaningful and mindful traditions.
- Our society has a missing component: we need to **find culturally rounded ways to heal** from trauma, that resides in communities, and are supported by funders.
- Practical tools to practice self-care can include many outlets, but professionals need to be aware that not all of them will be comfortable, or will work for everyone in the same way.
- Meditation and certain movements may feel very uncomfortable to people. Keep trying new tactics until helpful options are found.

PRACTICAL TOOLS AND TIPS

- **Body scan exercise:** diaphragmatic breathing means you are in control, breathing through the chest is a reaction where you are not in control.
- **Deep breathing – meditation exercise:** Studies show meditation changes brain activity, enhances functioning in conflict monitoring and attention. Results in decreased stress, lower blood pressure and blood sugar, and improved mind.
- **Mindfulness:** can begin with 90 seconds a day. Focusing each day on one topic such as: gratitude, compassion, acceptance, celebration, reflection and forgiveness.
*Considerations about forgiveness: Who do you need to forgive, who needs to forgive you, and do you need to forgive yourself?
- **Movement – mountains, clouds and waterfalls exercise:** feeds the brain and positively changes physiological performance.
- **Nutrition.** Good nutrition has been proven to lift depression and anxiety. There are many ways to find foods that help you feel better such as through an elimination diet.
- **Restorative sleep:** prepare for sleep as you prepare for your day. This can include avoiding screen time 1 hour before sleep.

- Triggers can cause unhealthy and unhelpful habits personally and organizationally. If we are not aware of what these habits are, we cannot change from simply having reactions into creating a healthy response.
- **Building Resilience** happens in three ways:
 - **Awareness:** develop ways to notice your stress levels. Do not ignore your instincts, listen to your gut!
 - **Balance:** rest and recovery, learn what gives you energy and joy. Allow yourself to feel gratitude and joy as often as you can.
 - **Connection:** connect with yourself and others in ways that are comfortable for you. Allow yourself to connect with others!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Impact of toxic stress and trauma on the human body and mind

1. What is vicarious or secondary trauma? Is this the same as burnout?
2. Trauma can show up in both mental and physical ways. What are some impacts to our physiological system?
3. When we are repeatedly exposed to others' trauma our own cortisol levels can remain too high. Why can it be dangerous to have chronically elevated levels of cortisol?
4. Why can it be difficult to identify these types of traumatic symptoms in ourselves?

Recognize risk factors that contribute to burnout

1. What is the difference between compassion and empathy? Is there such a thing as compassion fatigue? Empathy fatigue? Why or why not?
2. Can you describe ways you might be experiencing vicarious trauma symptoms in your own mind or body? Do you recognize that your own past trauma may be affecting your work? In what ways?
3. What are some habits or ways of thinking you may have developed because of our own past trauma? Or from repeated exposure to others' trauma?
4. Have you been practicing any type of self-care? Can you think of skewed beliefs you may have that keep you from practicing self-care?

Practical tools to help better manage trauma symptoms

1. Throughout this training, there were a few practice exercises on how to practice self-care. Did any of the methods used during the training seem like they would work for you? If not, do you recognize why those methods were not a good fit for you?
2. Besides the methods practiced in the training, there were other ideas presented and are listed on page 1 of this discussion guide. Which of these ideas could you start working on this week?
3. Building resilience is such an important part of taking care of yourself and being able to model this skill to clients is important. Read through the "Dimensions of Resilience" PowerPoint slides numbers 34-37, and answer the very important questions listed there.
4. Can you think of poor organizational habits that may be causing issues in your agency (some are also listed on the PowerPoint handout)? How can you help address these habits and help to shift your organization's norms?
5. Creating a self-care plan takes work, but scheduling it in your day to day life will help. Create a tentative plan to either start some form of self-care, or to do some research on different options that might resonate with you.

PRACTICAL SELF CARE

<i>Organizational</i>	<i>Individual</i>
Leadership counts. Modeling self-care shifts social norms	10-15 minutes a day of spaciousness to start
Establish self-care as core competency – which does not reduce accountability to show up!	Music, movement, ceremony, nature, nutrition, sleep, gratitude, body work, social supports, breath work
Actively address poor organizational habits	Commit to identifying and shaving away negative personal habits. Practice noticing triggers and using new tools to self-regulate
Invest in personal and professional skill building	Read, experiment with new practices, find what resonates.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- **Additional Training:** Linda Eagle Speaker, with the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center, offers Mind-Body-Healing practices trainings. Website: <https://www.miwrc.org>
- **Book:** *Unstuck: Your Guide to the Seven-Stage Journey Out of Depression*. Author: James S. Gordon M.D. talks about finding relief through alternative methods such as food and nutritional supplements, movement, psychotherapy, mediation, guided imagery and spiritual practice. (Trainer/author was mentioned by presenter)
- **Website:** Catalyst Initiative: <http://www.georgefamilyfoundation.org/catalyst-initiative>

