

Vicarious Trauma & Self Care

Dr. Judith E. Pierson
Psychologist
Rehoboth Beach

That which makes us good at and
committed to this work

Is also that which makes it
challenging.

We do this because we care,
because we are naturally empathic,
and because many of us have
experienced trauma ourselves.

Many titles, similar concept

- Burnout
- Compassion Fatigue
- Secondary Traumatic Stress
- Vicarious Trauma

What is the emotional price of caring ?

- The stress scores of palliative care workers are almost twice as high as those of newly widowed women and higher than patients newly diagnosed with breast cancer.

(Vachon, 1987)

In studies of social workers:

- 39% reported current symptoms of burnout and
- 75% reported experiencing burnout at some point in their career. (Brown, 2008)
- 73% of social workers have considered leaving their jobs (Maslach, 2003)

- Social workers have higher rates of burnout than other helping professionals such as occupational therapists (Brown, 2008)
- In a study of British social workers 74% were experiencing high levels of anxiety (Lloyd et al., 2002)
- 62% of experienced Child Protective Service workers scored high on a measure of emotional exhaustion. (Anderson, 2001)

In a study of substance abuse workers

- 82% reported high psychological stress
- 33% were experiencing emotional exhaustion
- 36% reported diminished feelings of personal accomplishment (Oyefeso et al., 2008)

We can be as traumatized as
our clients

In one study

17.7% of caseworkers suffered from
secondary traumatic stress, while only

15.2% of Vietnam Vets reported post-
traumatic stress disorder (Kulka et al, 1990)

Vicarious Trauma

“Vicarious traumatization is the process through which the therapist’s inner experience is negatively transformed through empathic engagement with the client’s trauma material.”

(McCann & Pearlman, 1990)

Signs of Compassion Fatigue & Vicarious Trauma

- Hypervigilance
- Suspicion about people's motives & behaviors
- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares
- Intrusive images
- Anxiety
- Numbness
- Inability to experience pleasure

- Excessive caregiving (on & off the job)
- Cynicism
- Feelings of shame about no longer feeling like the warm, compassionate & optimistic person caregiver once was
- Reactivation of own issues
- Anger & irritability often due to fatigue

- Reduced tolerance for what are perceived as others' "petty problems"
- Depression
- Exhaustion
- Increased self-criticism
- Feel estranged from others

- Challenges to one's cognitive schema's (how one makes sense of the world)
- Shatters ability to believe the world is a safe, just, controllable, and meaningful place
- Carry the burden of the "terrible knowledge" about the underbelly of life
- Forces examination of life priorities (can be good but disruptive)

The Cost of Caring Questionnaire

Check-off List

What contributes to Vicarious Trauma?

- Bearing witness to trauma (ex. Death of a child or a young parent, or death due to traumatic event)
- Powerlessness of the patient parallels caregiver's powerlessness if they feel they need to "fix it"
- Childhood experience of parentification creates unrealistic expectations in caregiver

- Believing self-care is less important than the care we provide others
- A recognition that trauma is linked to a larger social/political power imbalances which are not easily remedied.

What contributes to burnout

- Working conditions (big caseloads, do more with less, excessive paperwork, low pay, excluded from administrative decisions, etc.)
- Patient contributions (multiple problems, economic limitations, hostile transference, suicide threats, fewer program options)
- Isolation (physical & psychic)

The Cost of Caring Questionnaire

Questions 2 & 3

Addressing Compassion Fatigue & Vicarious Trauma

- Must reduce stress and transform despair that comes with having one's view of the world shattered
- Normalize, don't pathologize. Figley (95) suggests the best counselors are most at risk because they care.

The ABC's Of Addressing Vicarious Trauma:

- Awareness (of own needs, limits, emotions & resources)
- Balance (of work & play; taking care of others & taking care of yourself)
- Connection (to oneself, others & to something larger)

- Develop cognitive schema's which recognize the miraculous standing next to the tragic

Human compassion is
equal to human cruelty
and

It is up to each of us to
tip the balance.

Alice Walker

- Ask for help when you need it
- Create an organizational climate that encourages self-care
- Make self-care a routine, not an infrequent occurrence

The Cost of Caring Questionnaire

Final check off list

Strategies for Refueling

- Psychologically
 - Journal writing
 - Sharing your feelings
 - Vent emotions in safe ways (throwing ice cubes, play sad music)
 - Visualize a safe & nurturing place and visit it regularly



Safe Place Visualization

Use affirmations to counter negative thinking:

I may not be perfect, but I'm perfectly fine

My needs and feelings count too.

I will treat myself as kindly as I treat others

I will respond to myself with compassion



Circle of Caring Exercise

Refueling

- Physically
 - Massage (simple or full body)
 - Ask for comforting touch
 - “Non-should” exercise (walking, playing)
 - Create healing/sacred space in your office & at home
 - Practice radical self-care
 - Create simple pleasures

Refueling

- Socially
 - Make time for pleasing social activities
 - Get out and try new things
 - Ask a friend to “just listen” for 15 minutes
 - Gather with “kindred spirit” (church, support groups, clubs & other organizations)

- Connect, Connect, Connect
- Get involved with social activism & community organizing
- Join a support group
- See if others at work would like to start a self-care support group

Refueling

- Spiritually
 - In response to the 3 C's (I didn't cause it, I can't change it, and I can't control it), try the 3 P's (Pause, Pray and Proceed)
 - Attend church or engage in a spiritual practice that is meaningful to you
 - Create rituals that speak to you

- Walk in nature
- Do whatever brings you closer to something bigger than yourself
- Read inspirational materials
- Put inspirational quotes, pictures or images around you



Develop a self-care
Plan for Yourself
Exercise

Other things that help

- Develop realistic expectations for self & employees
- If possible set aside some time in staff meetings to allow people to share their feelings
- Don't expect quick fixes

- Share coping strategies
- Confirm the positive experiences and ways in which is work enriches your life

"So how do you sit with a shattered soul
Gently, with gracious and deep respect.
Patiently, for time stands still for the
shattered, and the momentum of healing
will be slow at first. With the tender
strength that comes from an openness to
your own deepest wounding, and to your
own deepest healing. Firmly, never
wavering in the utmost conviction that evil
is powerful, but there is a good that is
more powerful still.

Stay connected to the goodness with all of your being....Give freely. Take in abundantly. Find your safety, your refuge, and go there as you need. Hear what you can, and be honest about the rest; be honest at all cost. Words won't always come; sometimes there are no words in the face of such tragic evil. But in your willingness to be with them, they will hear you; from soul to soul they will hear that for which there are no words. (Steele, 1989)

Crystal Exercise

Sharing our suggestions
and intentions.

Always remember:

If your compassion does
not include yourself, it is
incomplete.

- The Buddha