THUNDERBIRD PARTNERSHIP FOUNDATION

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Vicarious Trauma

What Is Vicarious Trauma?

Vicarious trauma can gradually impact a person's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing as a result of exposure to other people's trauma or being exposed to the details of a traumatic event(s). Because of First Nation's experience of colonization, oppression and racism, trauma is consistent and pervasive; it comes in many forms and is not just an *individual* experience but impacts the whole community. The experience of trauma often becomes normalized; people start to think *that's just the way things are*. The impact of both an individual experience with trauma, and the normalization of trauma as a community experience is harmful to every aspect of our being.

Who Is Affected by Vicarious Trauma?

People in the helping professions or in-service to their community who have a role to listen, to hear and to witness the pain and despair of others are most affected. The trauma is experienced vicariously, meaning indirectly through their helping role of listening, hearing and witnessing.

If you have vicarious trauma, it means you care what happens to the person who has experienced the trauma. It says you feel their pain. It means that you're a loving, caring person who looks beyond self to see the suffering of others so that you can help them. But remember it is important to try to find a balance!

Risk Factors

• having a past history of trauma

• being overworked

• ignoring health boundaries

• having a lack of experience on the job

• having too much experience (being on the job for many years)

• working with large numbers of traumatized children, especially sexually abused children

• working with large numbers of clients who suffer with dissociative disorders

• having too many negative clinical outcomes (Bloom, 2003)

We are connected to all things – people, our Mother the Earth and our relatives who are plants, trees, water, animals and rocks. We are all related to one another and need to look after each other.

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What Does Vicarious Trauma Do?

Vicarious trauma can cause gradual unconscious changes

- diminishing hope – your spirituality might suffer as you lose Hope and a sense of Purpose and begin feeling disconnected from others, loss of sense of humour and joy for things you once loved

- limiting an openness to possibilities, ignoring one's own needs for support

- feeling increased stress and anxiety

- suffering from burnout – you might feel less satisfied in your job or be late or absent often, impatient and irritable, negative or cynical; initial feelings of worry for others can turn into judgement of others, accusing them of not caring enough, doing enough or not doing things right

- physical symptoms such as ulcers, heartburn, headaches, exhaustion, or even rashes

- isolating or avoiding tasks, sleeping less or eating less, alcohol/substance misuse or other risky behaviours

- having trouble remembering things, concentrating, or making decisions

- worrying that you're not doing enough for the people you want to help

- continuously thinking about the traumatic event, you heard about or witnessed

- thinking or dreaming about the person you're trying to help and their traumatic experience

- instead of being engaged with the present moment, you dwell on an incident that happened to someone else

Some Coping Strategies

Individual – Personal lifestyle improvements and other health related activities such as regular exercise, diet, relaxation techniques, time management, getting sufficient rest/sleep, and trying a new hobby

Workplace – Staff development, changing jobs and role structures, management development, organizational problem solving/decision making/agency goals and guiding philosophies

Community – Planning for better work environments, providing opportunities to develop special interests, making it easier to work with difficult clients, increasing organizational negotiation skills, providing more career counseling and professional development, and giving professionals a greater role in planning change (Crow, 2004)

This fact sheet draws from resources developed by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, available at www.thunderbirdpf.org, in addition to the following sources:

Betterhelp.com (Feb 2020). *What is vicarious trauma and how is it treated?* Retrieved from https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/trauma/what-is-vicarious-trauma-and-how-is-it-treated/

Bloom, S. (2003). *Caring for the caregiver, avoiding and treating vicarious trauma.* In A.Giardiano & E.Datner & J.Asher (Eds.), Sexual Assault victimization across the lifespan. (pp 459-470). MO:GW Medical Publishing. Retrieved from https://www.cmcainternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Bloom-Caring-for-Caregiver.pdf

Crow, R. (2004). *Stress and burnout amongst Aboriginal Peoples: Quantitative and qualitative inquiries.* School of Graduate Studies, University of Lethbridge. (pp. 86).