

VICARIOUS TRAUMA TIP SHEET FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTRE WORKERS

Vicarious trauma is an unintended consequence of caring for and attending to trauma survivors. It is “the inner transformation that occurs in the inner experiences of the therapist that comes about as a result of empathic engagement with clients’ trauma material” (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995; p. 31).

In addition to experiencing vicarious trauma, Sexual Assault Centre workers may experience secondary stress or secondary traumatic stress. Workers may experience reactions that mirror the reactions of survivors to the original trauma. When

experiencing secondary stress, a Sexual Assault Centre worker may experience flashbacks of clients’ experiences, intrusive thoughts of client material and intrusive dreams, sleep disturbance and overall fear (Bellicoso, 2017).

The experience of vicarious trauma is not an indictment of our lack of self-care. Self-care alone will not protect us from the impacts of repetitive exposure to traumatic material, although it is the foundation from which we will nourish and protect ourselves. It is imperative that we adopt processes for ourselves that

both protect and replenish us within the workplace (Kearney, 2018).

Specific Considerations:

Our own trauma history, mental health baseline and intersecting identities interact with the role we hold as Sexual Assault Centre workers in providing us with both unique resiliencies and vulnerabilities. Although many of us have done significant personal work before entering into the field of trauma response, it is important to stay open to moving in and out of our own personal counselling during our tenure as a Sexual Assault Centre

worker. Trigger points of our own trauma history may be brought to the surface, or the cumulative effect of exposure to others' trauma and the lack of justice for survivors may increase feelings of depression and anxiety.

Several research studies have examined the presence of vicarious trauma specifically for sexual assault counsellors and outreach workers, and their self-care responses. One study (Schauben & Frazier, 1995) revealed that only 35% of the workers engaged in some regular form of activity to offset vicarious trauma. Another study (Johnson & Hunter, 1997) found that sexual assault counsellors employed avoidance and escape strategies more than other counsellors to cope with their work.

Workers who are providing telephone crisis support and/or hospital accompaniment are often interacting with a survivor at the height of their trauma. The intensity of these interactions and the possibility of observing first hand visible evidence of the assault they have endured is absorbed by our nervous systems, and may elicit a freeze, flight or fight response within us that we try to moderate in the moment. Please consult the information under remedies regarding resetting the vagus nerve for strategies that can be used in the moment to support yourself when this occurs, and consult the debriefing strategies in the same section.



Following a review from 2009 to 2014, it was determined that 1 in 5 reports of sexual assault to the police result in a trial; 1 in 9 of those trials will result in a conviction, and 1 in 15 of those convicted will receive jail time (Source: Statistics Canada, [From arrest to conviction: Court outcomes of police-reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009 to 2014](#), published October 2017). This disproportionate lack of justice for survivors of sexual violence erodes our sense of hope and justice. Sexual Assault Centre workers are at the epicenter of what we now term “rape culture”, and through this work they hold many stories, images and outcomes that confirm its reality. Female-identified workers are also personally navigating the reality of living within rape culture and having to witness its impact professionally.

Routinely being the conveyor of information to a survivor of delays in the progression of

their legal case, having their case rejected by the legal system, or the lack of a conviction leaves workers with the responsibility of witnessing and supporting a survivor’s despair, outrage or hopelessness at the same time we ourselves may be holding the same reactions. Sexual Assault Centre workers intersect with systems within the criminal justice field that they may feel unable to influence in meaningful ways. The inability to be an agent of change may result in feelings of powerlessness and helplessness.

Please remember that although you yourself may not be able to bring a sense of justice to the survivor, your belief in them, your willingness to stand with them as they experience the systems of justice, and your work on their behalf to increase their access to resources (protection orders, counselling, etc.) validates their experience and conveys that their suffering



matters and that their emergence into healing is within their power. It may be helpful to focus on where our support effects change or meaning, rather than where we do not hold influence.

Cumulative exposure to details of sexual intrusion and violence may over time effect our connection to our bodies and/or openness for sexual intimacy. Workers may discover that their bodies are storing automatic responses to initiations of physical intimacy or sexual expression that does not match their emotional, mental or relational state. Please consult the remedies section for specific antidotes to this impact.

Remedies:

• **Personal Resilience and Self-care:**

Ensure your foundation of self-care is intact and robust. If unsure, access one of the assessments listed below. Our foundation always includes good nutrition, good sleep, regular physical exertion, regular contact with nature, loving connection with others and spiritual connection.

• **Releasing Impacts**

Establishing a regular practice of connecting with your body, and moving absorbed energy through and out of your body is foundational for maintaining access to your own sexual desire and expression.

Yoga (in particular yin or restorative), mindful walking on actual earth (not concrete), and shaking off held or absorbed energy is all helpful. Having honest conversations with your sexual partner regarding the absorption from witnessing sexual trauma, and negotiating ways of making contact with each other verbally and with mindful physical touch at the initiation of intimacy may be helpful.

- Revenge fantasies can be a method of rewriting a trauma that is imbedded in your psyche and providing a release from the powerlessness the survivor and/or yourself feel in response to a specific assault or rape culture. As one sexual assault counsellor stated, “Sometimes I do spend a lot of energy doing revenge fantasies. They’re fun. I work it through there.” (Wasco & Campbell, 2002, p. 12).

- For sessions, calls or accompaniments that were particularly intense or held traumatic detail, a structured debrief with a colleague or supervisor in which you relate the sensory information that is associated with that interaction can be helpful. For example, talk to that person about what your body felt/experienced/did during the interaction, what you saw (literally and in your mind’s eye), what you smelled, and the tone of voice or other sounds you recall during that interaction. Naming sensory details assist the body and nervous system in letting go of

what was absorbed at that time. Please keep in mind that a low impact debrief is possible by avoiding retelling of gory details, but keeping the focus on what your senses experienced. When a work day or meeting has had significant impact on you, take fifteen to twenty minutes at the end of your day to sit with a blank piece of paper and colour, scribble, or jot a few words down on what you are holding or carrying from the day. Approach the paper as your container for what you have absorbed. Continue scribbling or colouring until you feel quiet inside, then fold the paper up repeatedly until you cannot fold it any longer. Either discard it right away, or write what you are invoking for yourself as your super power, self-care, or reminder that you can be well on the outside of the folded paper, and then let the paper go.

- When a particular survivor continues to enter into your thoughts, offer loving kindness (or metta) meditation for them as a way of offering something beyond your office, but also for yourself. The teaching of loving kindness meditation is that we start with offering kindness to ourselves, then the person who is occupying our energy, and then out into the world to all beings (including our animal friends). <https://positivepsychology.com/loving-kindness-meditation/>



- Exposure to traumatic material lodges in our bodies and nervous systems. Resetting our vagus nerve (and thus stimulating our parasympathetic nervous system) throughout our workdays can assist in offsetting vicarious trauma. Simple actions like humming for two minutes, splashing cold water on your face, or creating saliva from sucking on a strong mint or cinnamon can all stimulate your vagus nerve. For more strategies consult https://drarielleschwartz.com/the-vagus-nerve-in-trauma-recovery-dr-arielle-schwartz/#.X_Inn-B7lQI

- A simple four-and-a-half-minute body practice that can assist in bringing your amygdala out of a false danger signal and stimulate your vagus nerve is described by trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem in an interview with Krista Tippett from On Being at

<https://onbeing.org/blog/ra-ce-and-healing-body-practice/>

- **Resilience Through Prevention:** Explore ways you can participate in furthering prevention of sexual assault – training with young people, educational campaigns etc., that offset the helplessness and hopelessness that can build from living personally and professionally within rape culture.

- **Awareness:** Remember the ABC's of offsetting vicarious trauma: **A:** awareness **B:** balance **C:** connection. Awareness invites us to have mini-rituals in our scheduled work time where we are attuning to ourselves, our needs in that moment, and the impact of the day thus far. Each bathroom break can be your tuning in time, the washing of hands a washing off of energy you have absorbed. Awareness also includes noticing



and attending to the ways in which vicarious trauma is impacting or eroding your sense of self, the world, and safety. To enhance your awareness, it may be helpful to commit to completing a formal assessment of your wellbeing at least annually (numerous assessments are listed under resources on this sheet).

Designate one person you trust who is close to you in your intimate, personal life to be your “canary in the coal mine”. Educate that person about vicarious trauma, and ask them to give you a heads up when they see indicators of you being eroded by your work.

• **Balance:** From a workplace perspective, balance includes paying attention to your scheduling and caseload. If possible, schedule your more challenging clients during your more resourced time of day. Scheduling time for reflection, note taking, and phone calls is a proactive way of protecting your energy in order to reduce the sense of always feeling time-crunched. You may find it helpful to schedule time at the end of your day for wrapping up your day – not for client interaction. If you work with other counsellors and have a number of survivors on your caseload who are intensely in crisis, suicidal, etc., pay attention to that and seek permission to bypass another intake who presents in that

way to seek more balance in your caseload.

• **Connection:** means ensuring you are not isolating from your office colleagues, but also having connection to others who are not immersed in trauma work. Connection to spirit, land, creative expression and healthy vibrant intact others helps us balance out the exposure our work creates.

• Identify a colleague from your office or another sexual assault centre who you will have in person or virtual lunch with every week. Have a set, repeating lunch appointment where you meet in private to just talk and eat.

• Follow or join in with local, provincial, national, global activism against violence against women and children. Become attached to something larger than yourself; we are part of a vital global, active community, and rabble rousing is a strong antidote to the pessimism and helplessness we can feel. One source of this activism is the United Nations, who since 2013 has been promoting 16 days annually to protest gender-based violence.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/take-action/16-days-of-activism>

RESOURCES:

There is no quantitative assessment that measures vicarious trauma. Several

assessments that are useful for measuring impacts are:

Professional Quality of Life Measure (2009) is a self assessment that measures compassion satisfaction, burnout and secondary trauma. Available in multiple languages:
http://www.proqol.org/ProQoL_Test.html

A **Burnout** self-test can be found on the Mind Tools website:
https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_08.htm

Silencing Response Scale (Baranowsky 1996, 1998) is a self assessment that measures the impact of communication with trauma survivors on our ability to be present and emotionally resourced:
http://www.compassionstrengths.com/Silencing_Response.html

Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (Bride et al. 2004) is a self assessment that measures impact of exposure to client's traumatic material:
<https://theacademy.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/STSSwithscoreinterpretation.pdf>

Compassion Fatigue/ Satisfaction Self Test (Stamm 2013) based on the work of Charles Figley is an opportunity to measure levels of fatigue versus satisfaction derived from one's work:
<https://nwdrugtaskforce.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Compassion-Fatigue-Handout-6.pdf>



Mental Health Continuum Model for First Responders is a simple and clear continuum that assists in identifying the nature of impact or injury to your mental health from the exposure of your work and/or life events:
<https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MentalHealthContinuumModel-1.pdf>

Self-care Patterns Scale (SCPS-R) (Gonzalez, Leeds & Knipe, 2012) is an assessment to see how robust your self-care is in action and attitude:
<http://www.intra-tp.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/SELF-CARE-SCALE-with-Interpretation.pdf>

Another **Self-care Assessment** was adapted based on the work of Saakvitne, Pearlman, & Staff of TSI/CAAP (1996). An alternative way to use the assessment is to read the self-care activities and identify those you have left behind that you wish to return to, or to incorporate new self-care activities into your routines:
<https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/content/dam/socialwork/home/self-care-kit/self-care-assessment.pdf>

Further guides and assessments based on the work of Saakvitne, Pearlman, & Staff of TSI is the self-care and resilience wheels created by Olga Phoenix. The self-care wheel outlines self-care in six

areas of our lives, and comes with an assessment wheel and goal wheel, available at: <https://olgaphoenix.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SCWsWDmin.pdf>

And the resilience toolkit provides helpful information on how to build resilience focusing on self-care, relationships and living with purpose, available at: <https://olgaphoenix.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Resilience-Wheel-Toolkit.pdf>

Post traumatic growth

is a concept that examines the positive changes within us due to the exposure to other's suffering. For more information see:

<https://positivepsychology.com/post-traumatic-growth/>

(includes several videos.)

The inventory itself can be accessed at:

<https://www.careinnovations.org/wp-content/uploads/Post-Traumatic-Growth-inventory.pdf>

Tara Brach has developed a mindful emotional awareness

process entitled RAIN that allows practitioners to safely connect to feeling, develop awareness, nourish oneself and release. For materials and guidance on this process visit: <https://www.tarabrach.com/rain/>

Guidebook on Vicarious Trauma: Recommended Solutions for Anti-Violence Workers Richardson, J. (2001): https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/os_vicarious_trauma_guidebook-508.pdf

Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk, 2009. If you wish to view a 20-minute talk by van Dernoot Lipsky, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOzDGrcvmus>

On Being Podcast with Krista Tippett, a weekly broadcast that explores active spirituality and self-care in our current world. Justice making, and wholistic care features in her interviews.

Of particular note is starting points and care packages, broadcasts that promote practices to support those exposed to hurt:

<https://onbeing.org/series/podcast/>

Behind the Line Podcast with Lindsay Faas, a Lower Mainland clinical counsellor who specializes in trauma. The podcast is focused on wellness for front line responders and trauma: <https://www.my.thrive-life.ca/behind-the-line>

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