

WORKING WITH HT SURVIVORS: VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Overview

The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water and not get wet.
~ Naomi Rachel Remen

Vicarious trauma (VT) and secondary traumatic stress (STS) can develop in individuals who hear firsthand about another person's traumatic experiences. Vicarious trauma refers to unhealthy cognitive changes, such as an individual's attitudes and beliefs, resulting from the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to others' pain over a period of time. Secondary traumatic stress parallels symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in that the individual becomes preoccupied with trauma experienced by another person and has difficulty processing it. Compassion fatigue is associated with VT and STS; it refers to the empathic exhaustion that can develop when helping others. Developing sustained empathic connections with a trauma survivor can be overwhelming and lead to a diminished capacity to be empathic.¹

Addressing Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress, & Compassion Fatigue

Recognize the Signs

- Apathy and impaired ability to have empathy for others.
- Developing negative coping skills.
- Challenges to your spirituality that deeply impact your world view and sense of meaning.
- Difficulty managing your emotions, making decisions, and paying attention to detail.
- Problems in relationships and maintaining professional boundaries.
- Feeling disconnected from the world around you.²

Tips for Coping with the Effects of VT, STS, and Compassion Fatigue

- Limit the number of trauma survivors you work with at any given time.
- Outline and preserve personal and professional boundaries.
- Practice mindfulness.
- Accept help from your support system.

¹ Secondary Trauma & Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking
<https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/file/611/download>

² Understanding & Addressing Vicarious Trauma
https://headington-institute.org/files/vtmoduletemplate2_ready_v2_85791.pdf



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- Rest and relax.
- Make time to engage in activities you enjoy.
- Express gratitude.
- Be kind to yourself.

Resources

Victim Assistance Training Online (see Core Competencies and Skills – Self-Care)

https://www.ovcttac.gov/views/TrainingMaterials/dspOnline_VATOnline.cfm?tab=1#corecomp

Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project

<http://www.compassionfatigue.org/>

TEND

<https://www.tendacademy.ca/resources/>

Transforming Vicarious Trauma

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXuCBnX23Po>

Understanding Secondary Trauma: A Guide for Lawyers Working with Child Victims

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-34/september-2015/understanding-secondary-trauma--a-guide-for-lawyers-working-with/

