

Vicarious Trauma Lecturette

Nyla McCarthy

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Vicarious Trauma (VT) is also known as compassion fatigue. It's what happens to people in helping professions (ie. providers), to your inner self as well as coloring your perceptions of the world around you after hearing about and/or witnessing the pain, fear and terror that survivors of trauma have endured.

Every time we interact with others from a position of compassion, controlling our empathetic response, we put ourselves at risk. As Providers of services to people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, we are exposed on a regular (sometimes daily) basis to stories of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and other forms of trauma. We are asked to observe and report about these incidents as "professionally" as possible, which generally is interpreted as meaning without emotion in a fact based way.

When we are required to repress our natural instincts and emotions regarding horrific events, we are then storing those emotions in our bodies and psyches. It is a known fact that our brains produce cortisol when we are under stress. Cortisol is a brain chemical known to high performance athletes, who use and draw upon it to help them compete and win. Cortisol is also one of many chemicals our brains produce when we are in a state of fight or flight. How many of you have felt that nervous energy, that racy state, that agitation, when you have been in danger or involved in a really bad argument with someone? Well, that is cortisol doing its thing on you. It's trying to help you either flee or fight for survival.

Every time we witness a trauma to someone (or even hear about the gory details from someone else), our brain produces some of that cortisol. It's a natural response to help us survive.

When we have to repress our emotions in order to do our jobs or to help another person, that cortisol doesn't just go away. It simply stores itself in our bodies for a very slow release. Eventually, our bodies can become poisoned by too much cortisol.

Ever have trouble sleeping at night after having been involved in a traumatic, or emotionally draining, experience? That's in great part due to the stew of chemicals created by your brain, including cortisol, still hanging around when you go to bed.

Vicarious trauma is about more than cortisol, of course. It's also about being reminded of times when you personally might have experienced abuse or some kind of trauma. Or when someone you love experienced it. VT can trigger a form of PTSD in us; therefore, it becomes important for us to know how to recognize and manage

it. Anyone not familiar with the term PTSD? (wait or ask for someone to volunteer an answer).

Exactly. It's basically a form of being triggered, almost as though the event is happening again, no matter how long ago it might have occurred. There is lots of research going on about PTSD with war veterans right now and some exciting things are emerging about treating it: thought field therapy, mirror neuron stimulation, etc. But let's save that for another training because it's pretty complicated stuff and deserves more time. However, I encourage you to do some reading and research about both PTSD and vicarious trauma so you can go deeper than we are able to today.

I want to share a few of the warning signs, or symptoms, of it with you though and then I'll discuss some self care and prevention tips.

People in our field have some of the highest rates of stress related disorders and diseases of any profession. That's probably not a surprise to many of you. Humanitarian work, which is really what we are all doing, brings about several risks. If you are experiencing insomnia or nightmares, if you are repeating stressful conversations you have had in your mind over and over, if you are getting physically sick more often than usual and your immune system isn't functioning like it should, well, these are symptoms of VT.

It's not the same as burn out, I want to make that clear. Burn out happens over a period of time and can go away when you switch jobs or have a good long vacation. VT, or compassion fatigue, basically it is the cumulative effect of all that trauma you've experienced, directly or indirectly, because you care. It builds within your body and it keeps your mind and body in a state of arousal—and not the good kind.

People who find themselves becoming depressed and feeling hopeless about their own lives or the people they serve, or who begin self medicating more by drinking, using more pot or prescription medications or whatever, to “unwind”, people who feel angry most of the time and start needing to pick fights or argue just to get their energy going---or maybe the opposite: you've just gone numb emotionally and started criticizing or mocking people more than usual, these are some other symptoms of vicarious trauma.

So, how can we protect ourselves when the reality is that we work in an environment that puts triggers before us on a regular basis?

As hard as it is to do, we must learn to do better self care. Believe me, I know how hard that is. There don't seem to be enough hours in the day and by the time we get home from work, we are exhausted. But we absolutely need to prioritize and build in self care so we can stay healthy.

Experts say we must find a balance between work, rest, and play. We need to find time to do the things that bring us joy and make us laugh. Did you know that laughter triggers good endorphins, the kind of brain chemicals that fight cortisol poisoning?

It's important that we spend more time with our friends and family members that we love. That will give us a rush of Pitocin, which is the chemical new mother's brains secrete when they look upon their babies with love. Pitocin is a healing brain chemical.

If you like to write, then it will help to journal. Even if you don't like to write, just putting your thoughts down about that very bad thing that happened in a letter to yourself, then destroying it, can be helpful. Get outside in nature whenever you can. Those positive ions, which are the good energy rays of the sun, help restore red and white blood cells, which can help strengthen our immune systems.

Basically, nurture yourself in whatever way you can that will make you feel good. Hot baths, massages, if you can afford it (or exchange with someone, if you can't), eating a meal you love, asking for what you need. These things will help you overcome the cortisol toxicity. Find a way to nurture yourself regularly and then do it. What a concept, right?

In our work environments, we can create a space that feels a bit more nurturing. Maybe it's more photos or artwork on the walls. Maybe it's plants that flower. Maybe it's a soft pillow or cushion or some quiet time or music we can lose ourselves in for even a couple of minutes everyday. These will help manage our compassion fatigue.

Finally, there is this nifty little trick you can do to help yourself after you've been involved in a traumatic event or have had to report one. It's called Four Square Breathing and it is a technique that is thousands of years old. Really. It was developed by some of the earliest doctors in the world, way back in time in India before there were so many pharmaceutical medicines to prescribe.

It's simple. Basically, we are going to breathe in through our nose for a count of four heartbeats. Then, hold our breath for four heartbeats. Then exhale through our mouth for four heartbeats. And then hold again for four. Watch for a second while I model this, please. (Model). Now, let's do it all together. Don't be afraid to make the noise of breathing. (Do it once as a large group). Excellent.

Now we are going to do this four times. Four Square breathing! Get it? (Count gently out loud with them as they do this). Notice how you feel right now. Notice the sounds around you. Notice the feeling of the air on your skin. Is it hot or cold? (let the moment sit quietly for a few seconds).

You have just cleansed toxic, built up, cortisol out of your brain and your blood cells.

If you remember to do this after negative traumatic experiences of any kind, you are practicing good self care. You will be helping your body to heal itself.

Any questions?