Strategies for Reducing Secondary Traumatic Stress

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Introduction to the field of Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress, Compassion Fatigue, Burnout etc.

• There is a lot of confusing and overlapping terminology in this field

• In some areas there is not complete agreement on what terms to use

• In this session we will refer to stress and secondary traumatic stress as our focus areas
Good Stress (Eustress)
Acute Stress
Chronic Stress
The scanning brain

Recommended Reading
Buddha’s Brain by Rick Hanson
Hypothalamus
Its function is to send messages from the brain to the adrenals, the pituitary and other organs.

Pituitary Gland
It produces vital hormones like Growth Hormone, Luteinizing Hormone and Anti-Diuretic Hormone.

Adrenal Gland
It produces a wide variety of hormones that help control heart rate and other adrenal gland function that are involved in stress reactions.
Autonomic Nervous System

Parasympathetic
- Stimulates flow of saliva
- Slows heartbeat
- Constricts bronchi
- Stimulates peristalsis and secretion
- Stimulates release of bile
- Contracts bladder

Sympathetic
- Dilates pupil
- Inhibits flow of saliva
- Accelerates heartbeat
- Dilates bronchi
- Inhibits peristalsis and secretion
- Conversion of glycogen to glucose
- Secretion of adrenaline and noradrenaline
- Inhibits bladder contraction

Medulla oblongata

Yagus nerve

Chain of sympathetic ganglia

Solar plexus
Why don’t’ zebra’s get ulcers?

• Robert Sapolsky
• Researcher & Professor at Stanford University

Recommended reading: Why Zebra’s Don’t Get Ulcers by Robert Sapolsky
Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

Secondary traumatic stress is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another.
Brain perceives threat

When listening to stories of trauma or witnessing distress and trauma of others we are engaging with empathy.

When this evokes feelings of distress our brain registers a stress response to some degree.

This stress can be manageable, or become detrimental when it is experienced over prolonged amount of time.
Secondary Traumatic Stress

Exposure

Direct witnessing, hearing others’ accounts, witnessing prolonged suffering and distress

Intrusion

Avoidance

Arousal

Physical, emotional, & mental exhaustion

Compassion

Fatigue emerging
Immediate Symptoms of STS

• Heart pounding (when I thought about my work with clients)
• Panic attack
• Crying
• Poor eye contact
• Disheveled
• “It seemed as if I were reliving the trauma experienced by the client”
• Reminders of my work with clients upset me
• Intrusive thoughts, can’t concentrate, unfocused
• Avoiding certain clients
• Disturbing dreams (about work with clients)
Strategies for Intervention
Supervisor is present and on site a lot

- Present
- Attentive
- Checking in
- You ok?
- How doing?
- Nice work
- Grab a break
- Here’s a coffee
Vagus Nerve

- One of the cranial nerves that connect the brain to the two bunches of sensory nerve cell bodies
- Connects brainstem to the body
- Allows brain to monitor and receive information about several of body's different functions

Recommended Reading:
Born to be Good by Dacher Keltner
Simple Strategy 1

1. Breathe
   - Take about 3 or 4 minutes, breathe in and out mindfully about 20 times. Don’t try to count or anything, just focus on nothing but the breath. This will calm your sympathetic nervous system down and get you focused. Do this two or three times a day.
   - Many people’s breath is unnaturally shallow. The more you are aware of it, the more its natural depth will reestablish itself.
Simple Strategy 2

• Label what’s happening – put words on it
  • “I’m feeling anxious because....”
  • I’m getting triggered because this is the anniversary of....
  • “This one’s getting to me because it’s similar to what happened to my daughter when..."
Simple Strategy 3

• Remind yourself that emotions pass
  • I am anxious now and later I won’t be
  • I am triggered now, but tonight I will be feeling relaxed again
  • It’s bad now, but later it won’t be
Resources

• *Why zebras don’t get ulcers* by Robert Sapolsky, MD

• *Vicarious Resilience: A New Concept in Work With Those Who Survive Trauma* - Hernandez, Gagnsei, Engstrom

• *Born to be Good* by Dacher Keltner

• www.compassionfatigue.org

• American Institute of Stress: www.stress.org