Vicarious Trauma, Burn Out and Staff Retention in the Anti-Slavery Sector

A post event report summary including practical coping strategies and resources

Human Trafficking Foundation

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in the Anti-Slavery Sector
Post-Event Report Summary

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Introduction

The Human Trafficking Foundation organised a forum with expert speakers, open to anyone working in the anti-trafficking space, to explore vicarious trauma, burn out and staff retention in the sector.

When the Care Quality Commission released a report detailing their inspections of safehouse and outreach support services under the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract, they found that staff are dedicated and caring individuals who go above and beyond[1].They also found there are challenges around high caseloads and high turnover in the sector, an issue likely to impact the level of support provided to survivors and effect staff wellbeing.

When working in a sector chosen on the basis of a deep personal investment and commitment, it can be challenging to separate personal and professional and achieve work-life balance. People working in the Anti-Slavery sector may struggle to take time out of work for clinical supervision or time off in lieu, as it suggests taking a break from fighting for what you believe. There can be a feeling of guilt when colleagues appear to be working longer hours and the giving nature of the sector can mean one's

own wellbeing is overlooked. Managers or policy professionals may dismiss their own struggles by comparing themselves to people working directly with survivors; and in turn, frontline workers may dismiss their own struggles by comparing themselves to the survivors they're supporting. For those with their own experience of trauma, modern slavery or other forms of abuse, trying to protect oneself and create boundaries is a further challenge. Everyone has had different experiences and responds differently, but nobody is exempt from burnout or secondary trauma.

This post-event briefing aims to explore the impact of vicarious trauma and burnout on staff turnover in the modern slavery sector. Discussing practical coping strategies that have tangible effects on staff wellbeing and retention, it intends to provide a purposeful resource for frontline workers and their employers to best support themselves and each other.

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[1] Services for survivors of human trafficking and modern slavery

Building trauma – and survivor-informed organisations

Nahja Martin,
Sanar Wellness Institute

Individuals feel vicarious trauma as if it is their own traumatic experiences, as a result of being continually exposed to traumatic content from multiple sources, including the media, their personal lives and in this instance, working with people with lived experience of modern slavery. A cumulative impact on mental wellbeing results over time, and this is burnout and compassion fatigue. The response is understandable – human beings are not built to withstand continuously high-anxiety or high-emotional situations.

According to the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, trauma-informed organisations have a multitude of purposes. The first is to realise the impact of trauma and understand that there are pathways to recovery, with staff that are able to recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma. They also respond by fully integrating its knowledge of trauma into all of its practices. Finally, they actively seek to create a safe environment for both clients and staff to minimise the chances of re-traumatisation. Lowering the overall trauma levels experienced in the workplace not only increases effectiveness and staff retention, but also increases survivor engagement in the workplace by creating an environment that feels safe for survivors to enter as professionals to implement their expertise and help shape best practice.

A survivor-informed organisation is empowerment-based and avoids sensationalising survivors and their stories. Rather than perpetuating a culture of retelling survivor stories, which implies that there is little more a survivor can offer the sector, and reduces their input to another box ticking exercise. Integrating survivors' ideas and recommendations is integral to achieving organisations' goals, including supporting service users. Survivor-informed organisations are collaborative, supportive spaces that normalise trauma as a part of the human experience without diminishing it. As such, they can have positive consequences for staff turnover. They do this by demonstrating the organisation's values, opening up space for diverse voices and experiences throughout the whole structure of the organisation. This makes it far more likely that supportive policies will be prioritised and implemented.

Practical suggestions for Senior Leadership

> Employ and engage with survivors, utilising their expertise in all structures of your organisation, policies and projects, avoiding an emphasis on retelling one's story.

> Ensure all staff are adequately trauma-informed, able to recognise signs and symptoms in both themselves and others.

Running Hot, Burning Out: An Analysis of the Voluntary Sector Barometer

Jack Farnham, Pro Bono Economics

A wider picture of the charity sector demonstrates the synonymity between issues facing modern slavery sector workers and workers across the third sector as a whole. Charities are navigating being forced into a 'balancing act' by the recent cost of living crisis, where the increased cost of living both exacerbates reliance on charities and impacts their abilities to retain and recruit staff.

The need to grow the output of charities in line with the increase in demand has seen 30% of charities grow their workforce, but an overwhelming majority (4 in 5) describe their demand and workload to have increased. Larger charities have noted a particular growth in demand, but 64% of small charities are experiencing the same. Increased workloads are likely to negatively impact staff wellbeing, and therefore their ability to provide a supportive service to their clients.

It is no surprise, therefore, that 82% of organisations with a paid workforce have tried to recruit in the last year. As well as the need to scale up, financial conditions in the UK are impacting staff retention as staff members weigh up the stress and burnout of their jobs in relation to their pay and increases in their own costs of living. Again, larger charities are more likely to report problems with staff turnover – while 26% of employers reported staff retention issues, this number rose to 36% for large charities. Around half of employers have raised salaries in response to recruitment challenges, but in general wages increases in the charity sector have not been able to match those in the private sector.

Despite an ostensibly bleak picture, it is important to remember that the recession predicted at the end of 2022 was avoided. As such, levels of pessimism about the short-term outlook show small signs of improvement. 'Running Hot, Burning Out' by Jack Larkham and Mariam Mansoor of Pro Bono Economics also indicates that recruitment challenges are also hindering

charities' attempts to introduce the kind of organisational and technological changes that would help staff to better manage increasing demand. By highlighting how the current condition of the sector increases the risk of stress and staff burnout, the report reinforces the importance of centring staff welfare so that non-profit workers can best perform the objectives of their organisations during challenging times.

The report can be read in full **here**.

Leading by example in the modern slavery sector

Lara Bundock, Snowdrop

It's a particularly intense time to work in the sector for staff at every level. Burnout is commonplace and entirely understandable, resulting from high workloads and salaries that struggle to compete with roles in both the private and public sector. A lack of spare time and disposable income creates barriers to hobbies and downtime. Burnout takes on several forms, the first being directly work related. The charity sector involves a culture of voluntarily giving time, and this is reflected in the ways in which staff are often expected to work beyond their contracted hours, with little supervision or measures to address any secondary trauma. A second type of burnout involves the balance between home and work. There is a huge element of responsibility in all roles relevant to the sector, due to the vulnerability of those it aims to support. Feeling unable to control responsibilities directly contributes to stress, and this can manifest both at work and at home. An example of this is the worry about the impacts of legislation, such as the Illegal Migration Act, and it is vital that there is

space for open discussion in the workplace to voice concern about these impacts. During a time of significant numbers of people leaving the sector, pools of applicants for vacancies are including larger numbers of people with no prior experience of working with trauma. Those with no experience or training have an increased risk of vicarious trauma, high turnover and can lead to inadequate service to clients.

For management, being held accountable for the wellbeing of staff can be an additional stressor. Balancing staff wellbeing with a need for productivity can mean having to consistently review your organisation's practices and policies, contributing to management workloads that are not conducive with the idea of leading by example. It can be difficult to encourage work-life balance while tackling a considerable workload yourself, but fundamentally, low staff turnover is consistent with the provision of good service. This means that investing time and resources into caring for staff will itself contribute to the productivity element.

Practical suggestions for Managers

> Adopt a recruitment process based upon full transparency, from a clear and honest job description to clarity about what skills and experience are needed.

> Management should provide a salary that is competitive to others in the sector, research clinical supervision and staff benefits (these don't have to be costly) that are proactive not reactive, and make them clearly known.

> Management should provide a culture where staff feel comfortable utilising these benefits.

> Taking time off in lieu sets a good standard, with an acknowledgement that working out of hours is expected in frontline organisations, but with mindfulness of the fact that management working out of hours perpetuates the same culture for staff.

Resources

Snowdrop's vicarious trauma worksheet, which can be found **here**, is one resource to ensure supervision for staff and opportunities for safe and open spaces. It contains practical exercises enabling users to reflect on their own work-life balance, signs of stress, support network and personal self-care strategies.

Betsy de Thierry's 'Simple Guide to Trauma' series is useful for those working with children, young people, clients who had childhood trauma or for people who have journeyed through childhood trauma themselves. The guides are available in book shops and online.

Self-care to ensure effective support: a survivor's perspective

Alicia, Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP)

There is a common belief that professionals are not supposed to be vulnerable. They have chosen to be in a caring profession and it may not always seem appropriate to appear to be complaining when working with cases of severe exploitation.

Supervision and taking time out risks becoming a tick box exercise due to a need to balance so many priorities, which stops vicarious trauma from being addressed at the stage that it is mild enough to be more easily treatable.

Survivor support is noticeably negatively affected when caseworkers are suffering from burnout or secondary trauma, which exemplifies the importance of looking

after oneself in order to effectively look after others. Depersonalisation, where caseworkers have appointments with service users but appeared distracted or not present, are noted by these service users. In addition, lateness, not showing up or having to cancel appointments at the last minute due to workload are commonplace. All of these are premeditators of broken trust from the side of the service user, who is likely working hard to establish a trusting relationship with their caseworker. The lack of communication associated with working with a professional suffering from vicarious trauma can also lead to distorted judgement on the part of the caseworker, especially around identifying risk factors for crises that service users may be undergoing.

50% of professionals who work with trauma report feeling distressed, and 30% of trauma psychotherapists report extreme distress (Melissa Institute[2]). The sector attracts committed and sensitive individuals, who are unlikely to remain unaffected. It may be helpful to remember the oxygen mask analogy when considering the importance of self-care: if you're on an aeroplane and an emergency occurs, you need to put your own oxygen mask on before you try to help those around you.

Practical suggestions for frontline workers

> It should be ensured that support structures and self-care are implemented as a preventative measure and not a reactive one. Staff have a tendency to adopt a 'just get on with it' attitude, only seeking support once entirely burnt out and in crisis.

> Self-care involves self-reflection: take time to notice your personal boundaries and triggers, and utilise the support of your colleagues who are likely experiencing similar feelings.

> Survivors and frontline staff can experience trauma in similar ways, and that there is no shame or guilt in admitting that the work can take a serious emotional toll. It is not an easy career choice, but one we embark on with the best of intentions, and taking time for self-care is a necessity to ensure continued meaningful results.

Resources

The Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP) was established to ensure the expertise of those with lived experience is embedded in the work of the anti-trafficking sector. The LEAP is made up of independent consultants who co-work on commissioned projects and training requests from the sector. More information and the Expression of Interest form can be found **here**.

[2] Melissa Institute

Identifying and addressing self-care when working in the field of trauma

Laura Wood, VITA Network and Anya Charnaud, Senior Trauma Psychotherapist

Secondary trauma responses include:

- Feeling consistently agitated
- Heart pounding
- Fast, shallow breathing
- Poor appetite and weight loss
- Flat or low mood
- Low energy
- Unable to sleep
- Lack of social interest
- Overwhelming or unpleasant dreams
- A feeling of avoiding or procrastinating work
- A physically avoidant feeling of wanting to run away from a situation

It is the combination of fear and helplessness that lead someone to develop trauma responses – if a specific stressor arises but a person feels equipped to deal with it, they are unlikely to experience these responses. Similarly, if one feels unable to do anything about a circumstance but are not worried about the outcome, their body won't suffer these symptoms. The reaction is instinctive and thus has many physical responses.

A lack of preventative measures can be blamed in part on what culture and society expects of us. What does it look like to be a good person? Often it is taking on everything we are asked to, not complaining and sacrificing our own wellbeing for the benefit of others. A side effect of this is tying self-worth to productivity, and believing that not being able to be constantly productive is somehow shameful. As such, we are far less likely to reach out for help.

However, resilience is about recognising that everyone has limitations and undoing the impossible standards that have been set for us.

"caring for myself is not self-indulgent. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare".

Audre Lorde, 'A Burst of Light'.

Practical suggestions for everyone working in this space

> Ask yourself what you can personally do to make yourself feel safer, and take some time to reflect on the issue, and exactly what you feel helpless about at the time. Reflect on the extent of your ability to change these circumstances.

> Write things down to get them out of your head.

> We believe what we tell ourselves, so speak out loud and reassure yourself that you are okay.

> Recognise that there is, and should be, a distinction between where your work life ends and you begin.

> Acknowledge the remit and limitations of your role. You may not be able to single-handedly save somebody, but you can be part of a team that empowers and supports them on their journey.

Resources

Dan Siegel is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at UCLA and his books such as 'The Power of Showing Up', 'Mindsight' and 'Brainstorm' address dealing with trauma and the nature of the mind.

Gabor Mate is a Canadian physician and addiction expert. His book 'When the Body Says No' is highly relevant to the themes of trauma and stress discussed.

Vickr Frankl was a Jewish-Austrian psychiatrist and holocaust survivor. His book 'Man's Search for Meaning' addresses his personal ability to overcome traumatic experiences.

VITA network have an online **blog** which discusses self care.

VITA also have support and self-care resources and educational videos on their **website**.

If you need support:

The **Samaritans** are here to listen at any time of the day or night. Call free on 116 123 or visit the Samaritans **website**.

CALM is the Campaign Against Living Miserably, for people in the UK who are down or have hit a wall for any reason. Call 0800 58 58 58 (daily, 5pm to midnight) or free, anonymous **webchat** with trained CALM staff.

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