

Understanding Vicarious Trauma

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About Me

Academic research psychologist who studies sexual assault

- Study the impact of trauma on health and well-being
- Study survivors' disclosures & help-seeking
- Over course of my career, I've studied **17,326** survivors' stories



2

About Me

Academic research psychologist who studies vicarious trauma

- Study impact of trauma exposure on advocates, nurses, police, prosecutors
- Study impact of trauma exposure on researchers
- Over course of my career, I've learned this affects **EVERYONE**



3

Trauma affects everyone and everything in its wake.
It creates a ripple effect of radiating pain and suffering.

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky



4

The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily
and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as being able
to walk through water without getting wet.

Rachel Remen



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Session Goals

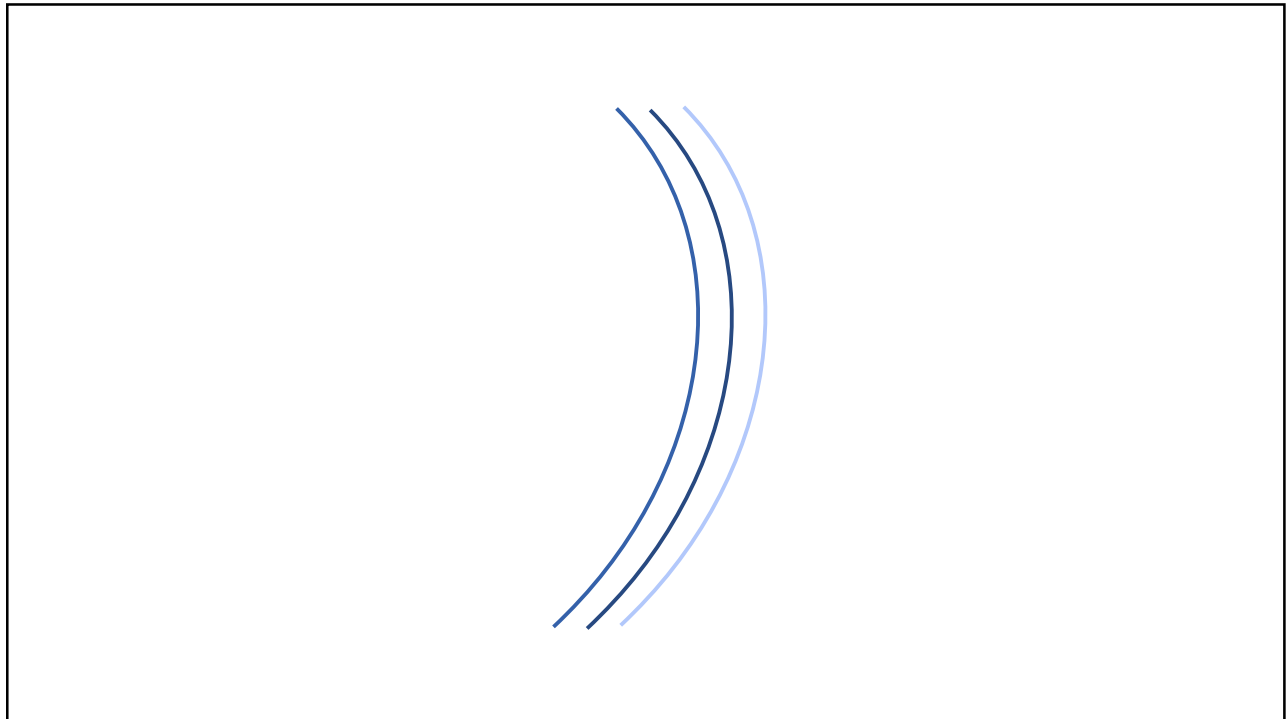
- 1 *Acknowledge* that exposure to trauma takes a toll on us
- 2 *Describe* how exposure to trauma takes a toll on us
- 3 *Examine* how exposure to trauma affects our health & job performance
- 4 *Promote* supportive solutions at individual- and organizational-level



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8

This is what I signed up for.

This is my calling.

I swore an oath to serve and protect.

Whatever comes with that is
whatever comes with that.

~ Law Enforcement Detective



9

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Every day, that's what a day
in the office is for us.

The very worst of mankind
every day.

We're right there, in their
suffering ... it hurts, it hurts
us too.

~ That Very Same Law Enforcement Detective

10

Nursing is my passion. My patients are my passion and I give them everything I have every day.

My job is to be there for *them*.

To care for them means that I need to absorb what they cannot hold.

~ Forensic Nurse



11

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~ Forensic Nurse



Nightmares, so many nightmares

Sometimes doing the body diagrams, I'm just not there. I'm marking, documenting, but *I'm* not there.

~ That Very Same Forensic Nurse

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We talk about this in social work.

The emotional labor and the
vicarious trauma, so I'm aware.

I'm prepared, I understand.

~ Victim Advocate



13

We talk about this in social work.

The emotional labor and the
vicarious trauma, so I'm aware.

I'm prepared, I understand.

~ Victim Advocate



There is literally no way to
prepare for this.

When you've heard it all,
you haven't. Something
new and horrible comes up.

At the end of the day,
sometimes I just cry.

~ That Very Same Victim Advocate

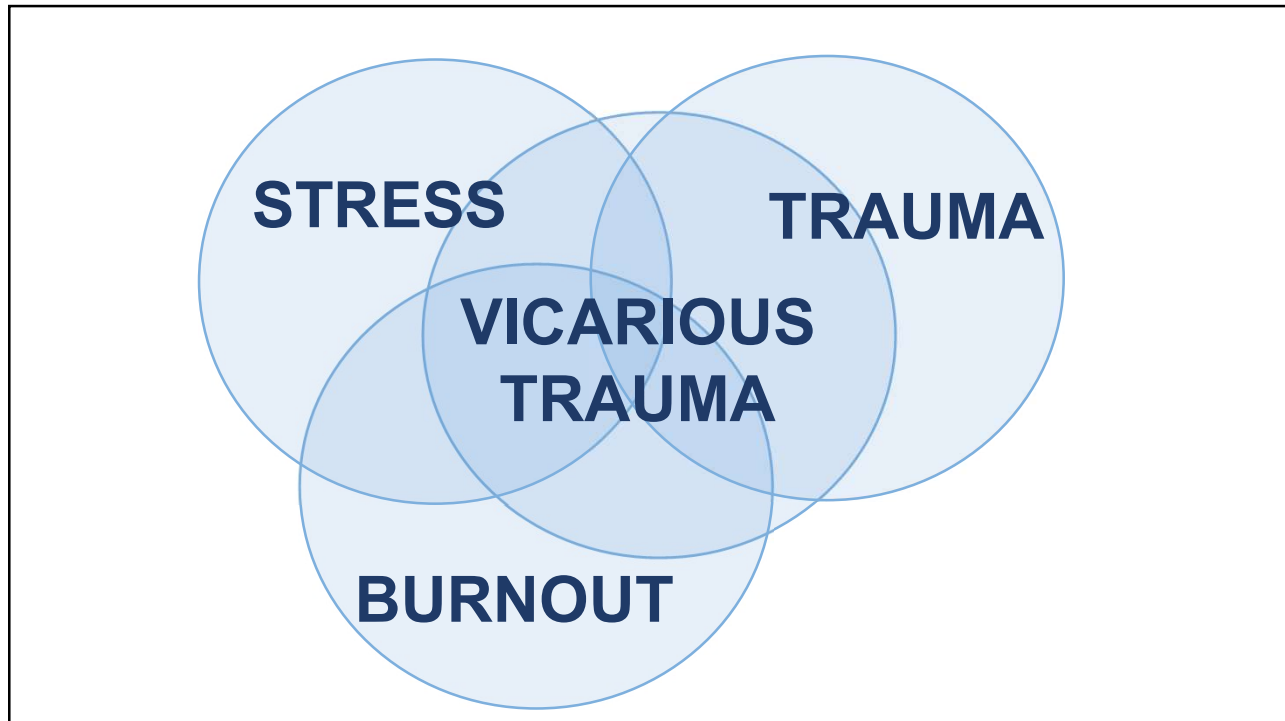
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**That Feeling of
Too Much Feeling**

16



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What Is Stress?



Stress is physical, mental, or emotional factors that causes bodily and/or mental tension



Stress causes biochemical, physiological, and behavioral changes to adapt



Uncomfortable experiences around & inside us that cause uncomfortable reactions within us

SOURCE: Baum (1990)



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Sources of Stress

- | | |
|---|---|
|  Environmental | Assaults the five senses
noise, pollution, weather, traffic, disturbing images |
|  Social | Interpersonal interactions
work, relationships, loss, conflict, oppressions, microaggressions |
|  Physiological | Bodily changes
adolescence, menopause, injuries, illness |
|  Cognitive/Emotional | Our own thoughts and feelings
interpretations, appraisals, coping |

SOURCE: Miller & Smith (1994)

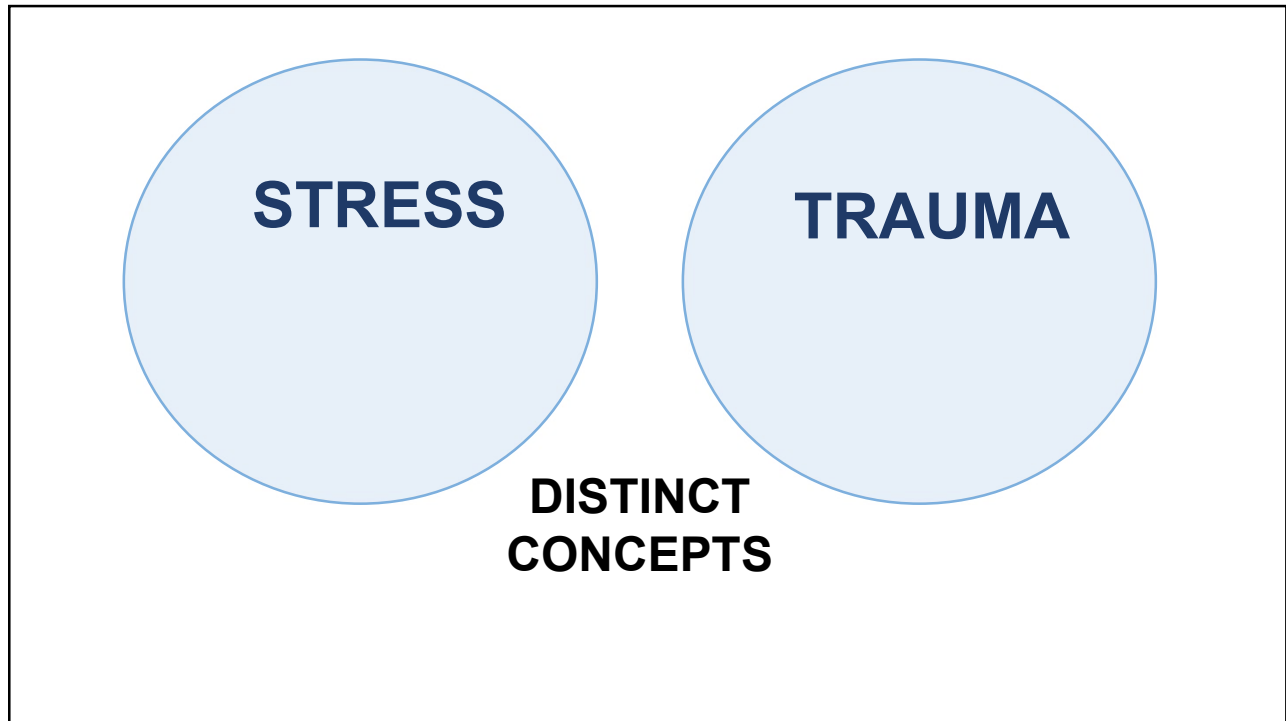
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What Is Trauma?

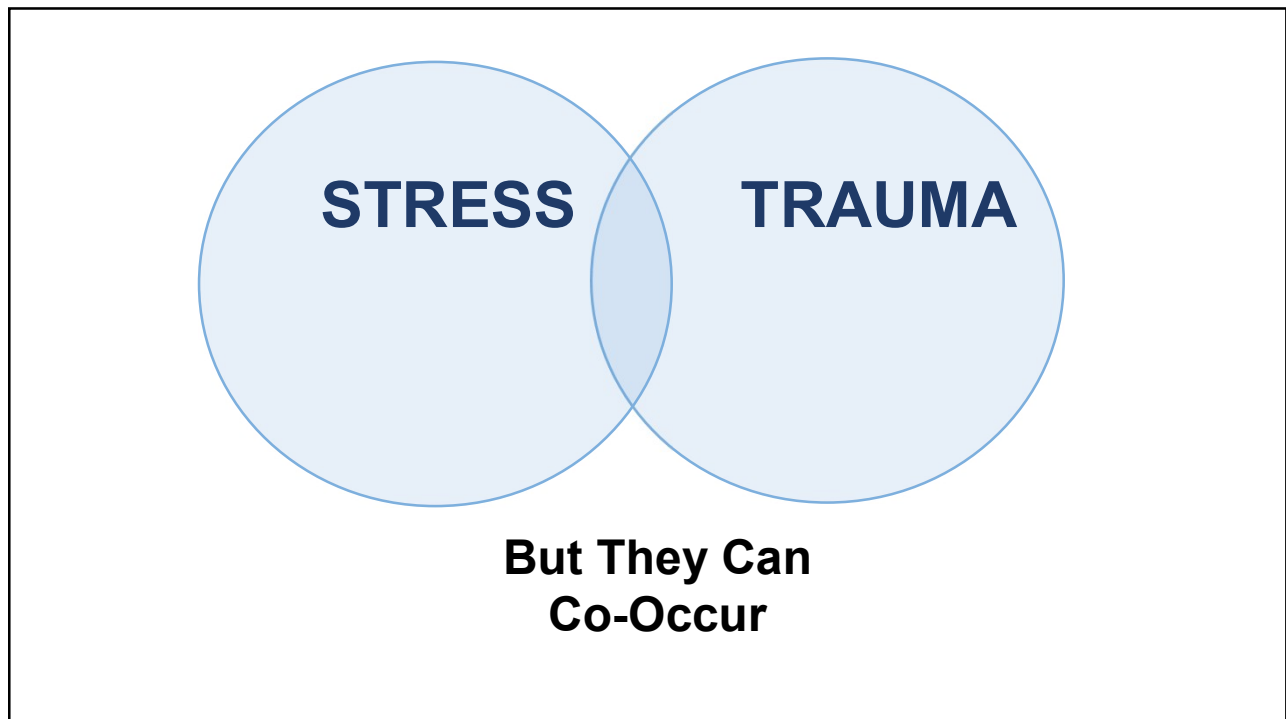
-  Trauma is the emotional & bodily response to a terrible event that threatens a person's life, bodily integrity, and/or sanity
-  Examples: natural disasters, accidents, war, human rights abuses, criminal violence, scarcity & deprivation
-  During the event, person's ability to integrate his/her/their emotional experience is overwhelmed

SOURCE: Herman (1992)

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What Is Vicarious Trauma?



Vicarious trauma is the emotional & bodily response to sustained exposure to the trauma and suffering of other people



Examples: working with victims of crime, working in disaster response, working in war/conflict zones



The cumulative exposure and empathic engagement causes changes in providers' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors

SOURCE: Cieslak et al. (2014); Figley (1995); Rothschild (2006)

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Who Experiences Vicarious Trauma?



Everyone who works with victims of trauma (varies in duration, intensity)



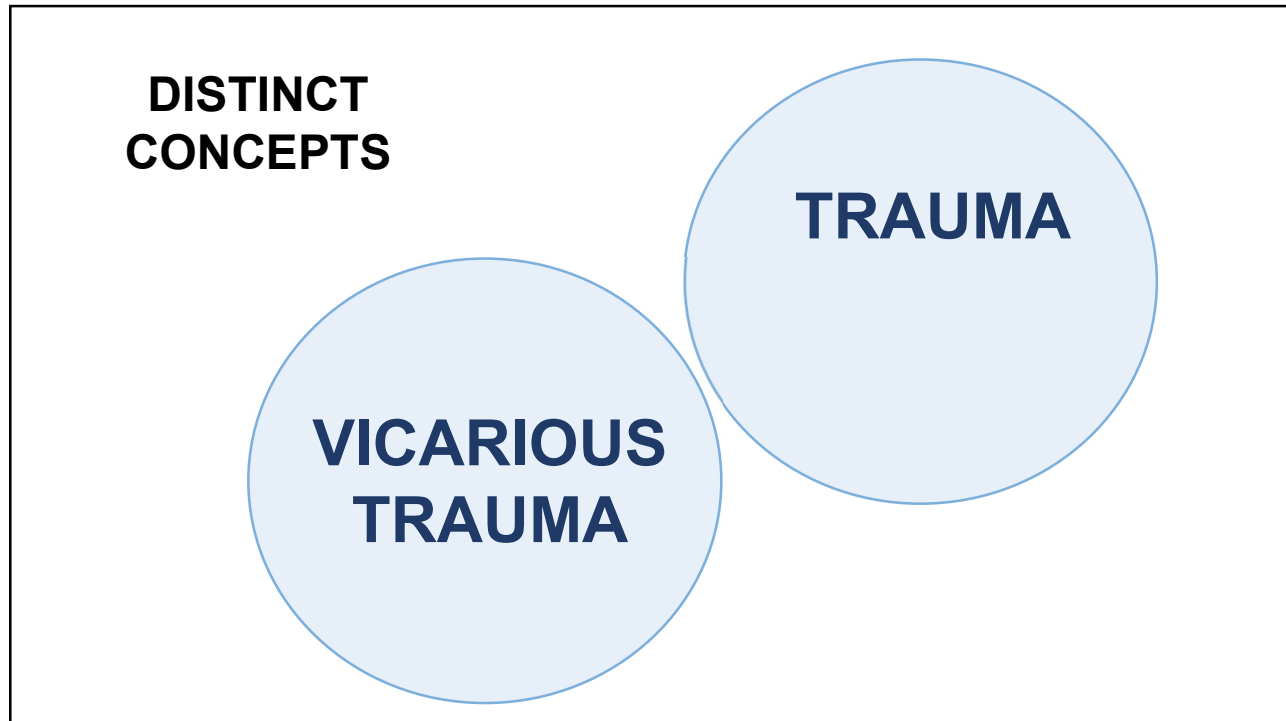
Experienced by professionals of all genders, ages, years of experience, and across all disciplines



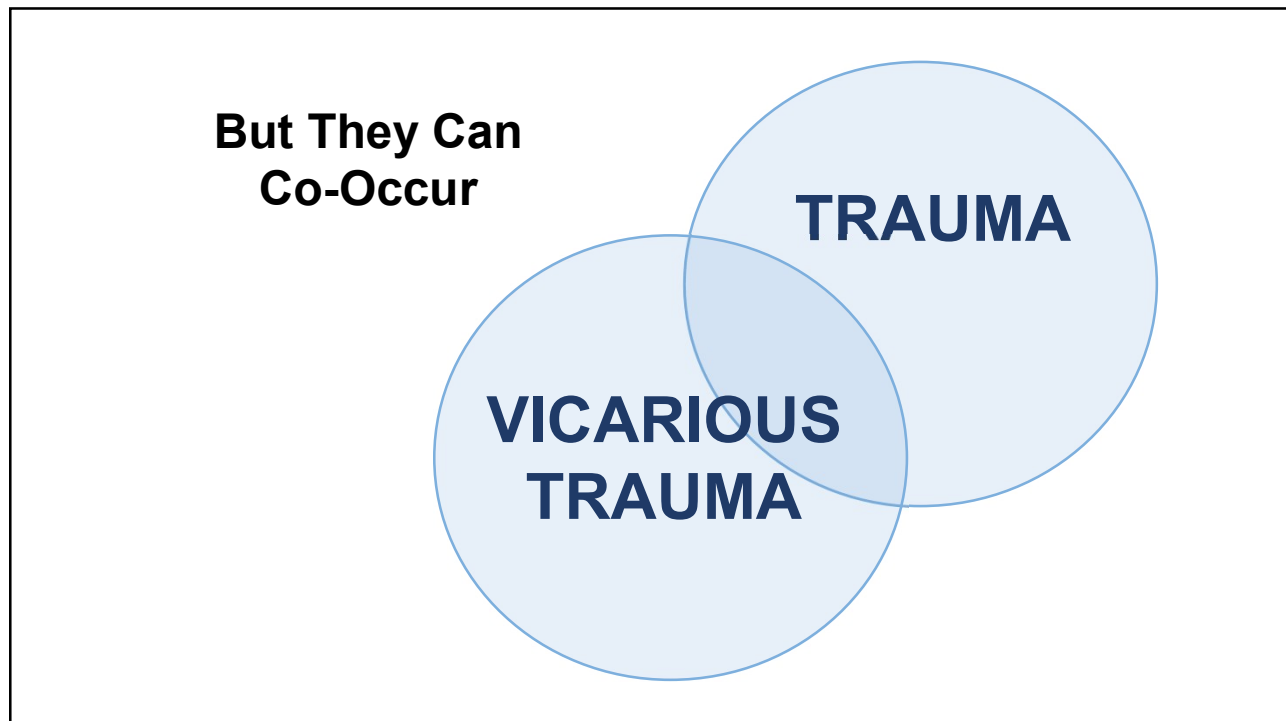
Happens whether you deliberately chose this kind of work or whether you were assigned this kind of work

SOURCE: Cieslak et al. (2014); Rothschild (2006)

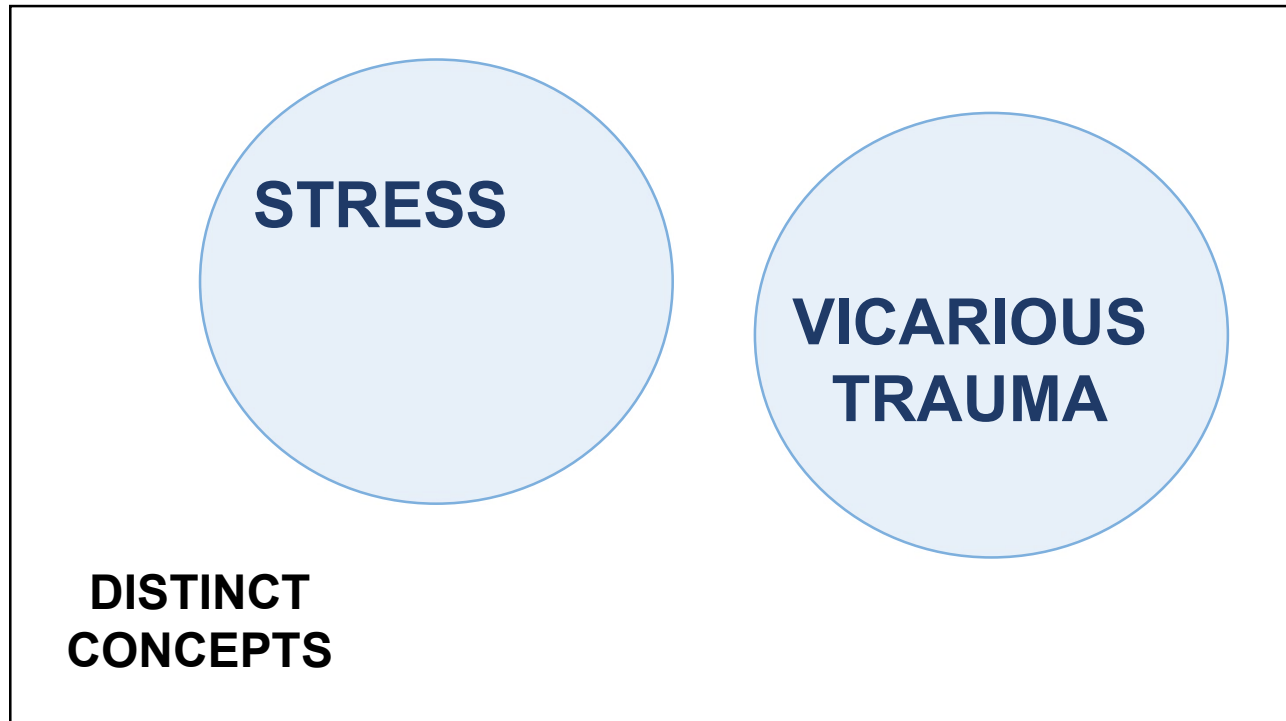
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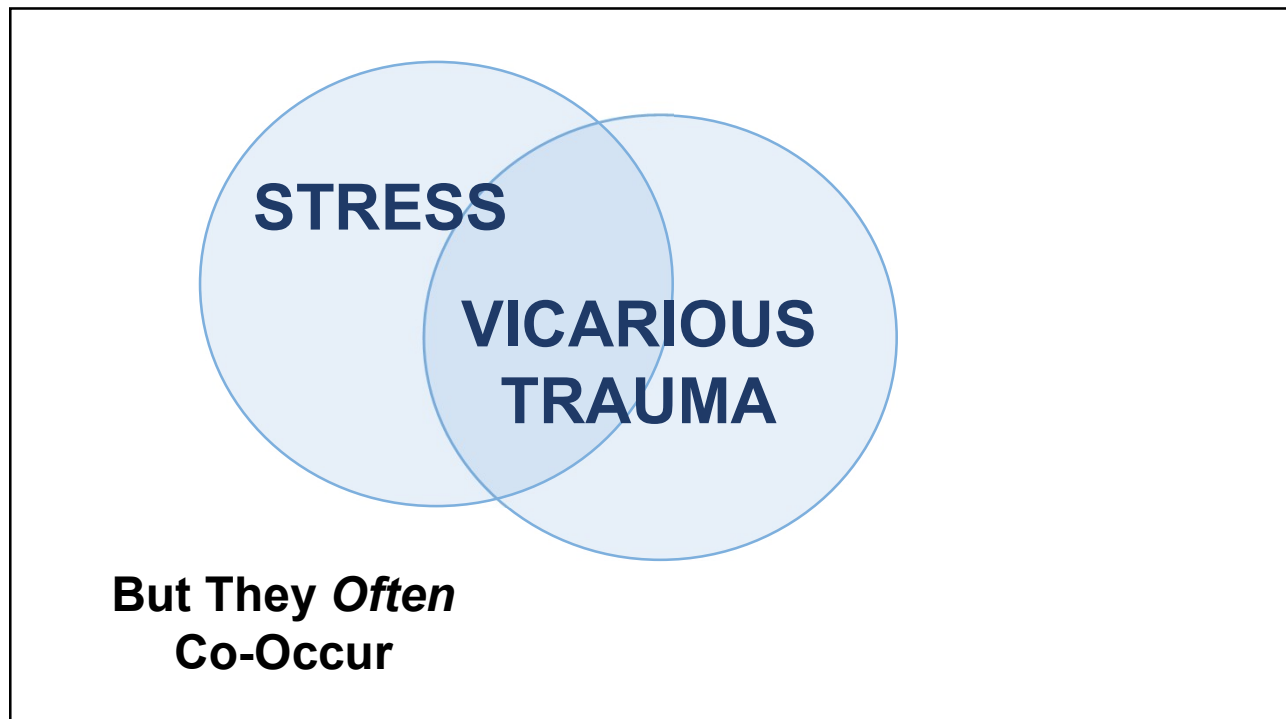
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What Is Burnout?

-  Chronic frustration with work environment that causes feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, apathy, cynicism
-  Often caused by excessive workload, not enough resources to sustain work, lack of recognition and praise of work, constant conflict
-  Burnout causes changes in providers' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors

SOURCE: Cieslak et al. (2014); Maslach & Jackson (1986); Rothschild (2006)

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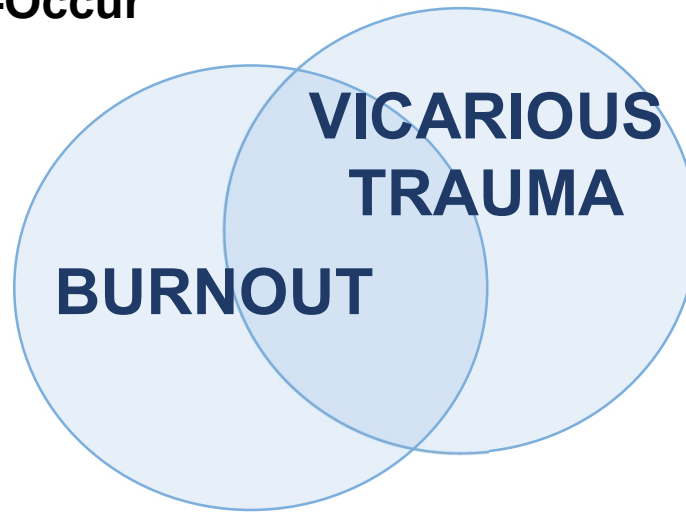
**DISTINCT
CONCEPTS**

BURNOUT

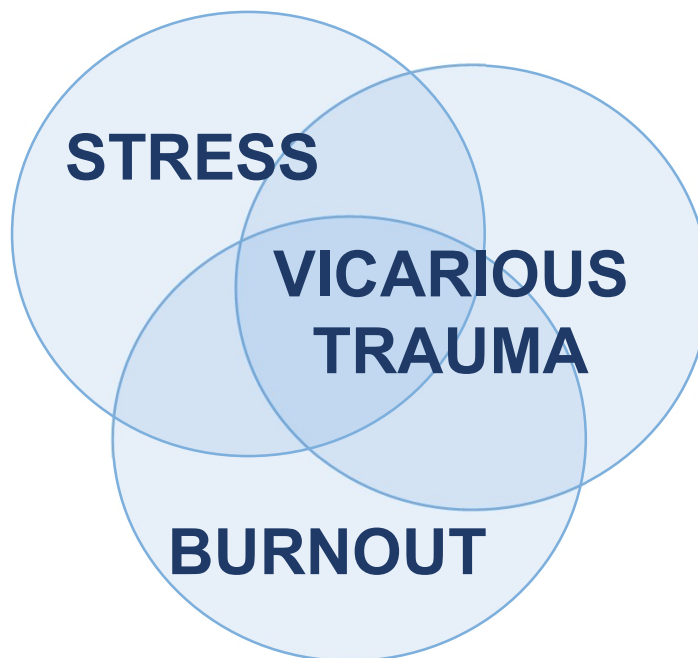
**VICARIOUS
TRAUMA**

30

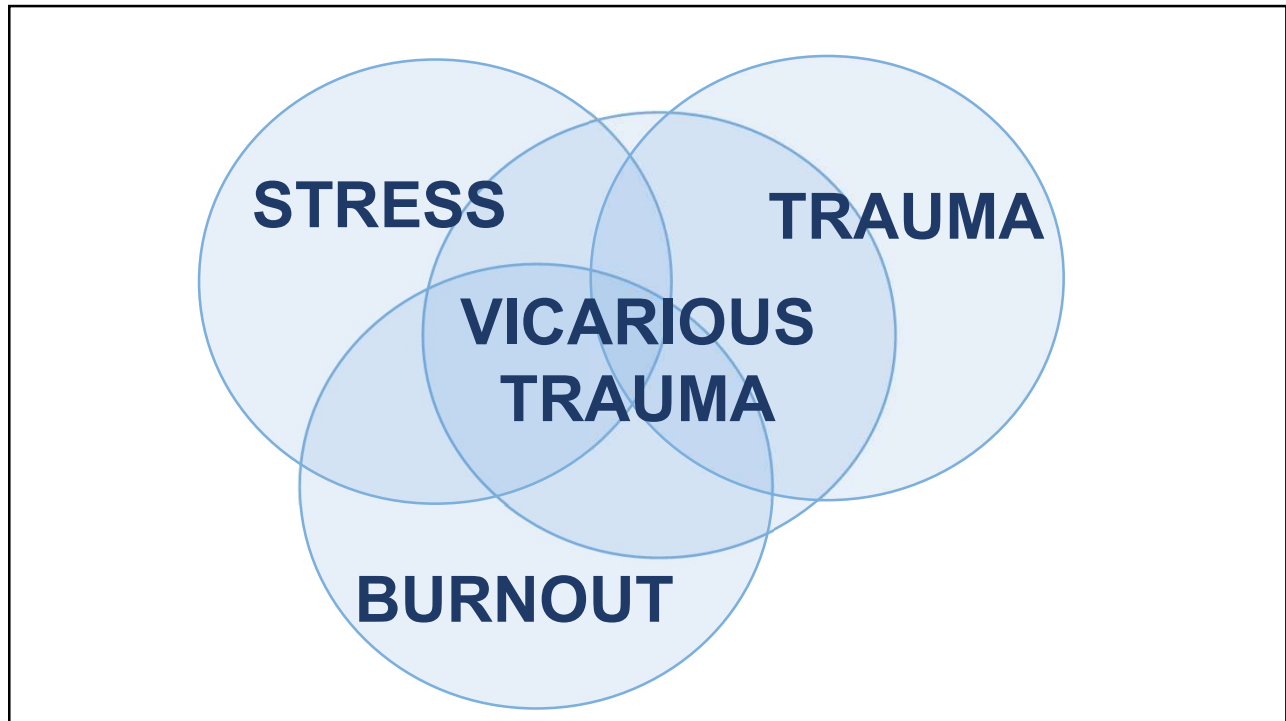
**But They Often
Co-Occur**



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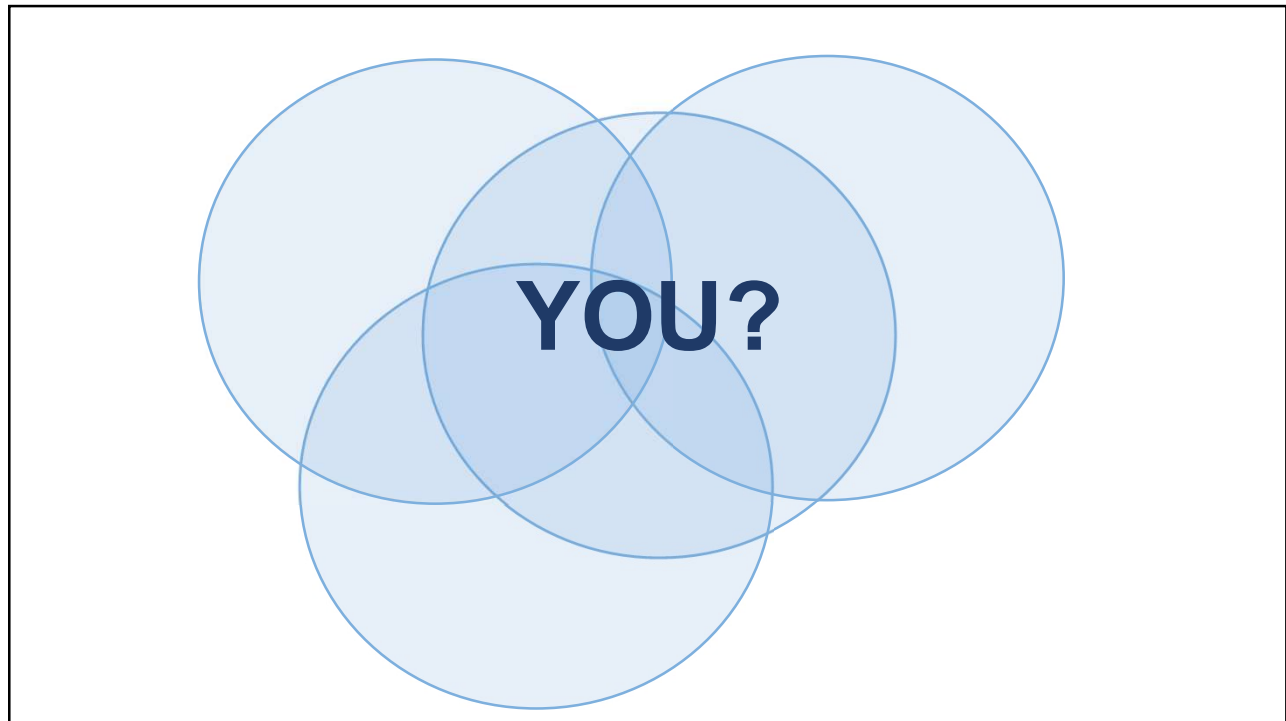
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**That Feeling of
Too Much Feeling**

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The Impact on Our Health: Immediate

- 🌀 Increased heartrate
- 🌀 Increased breathing
- 🌀 Body temperature fluctuations
- 🌀 Difficulty concentrating
- 🌀 Headache
- 🌀 Fatigue
- 🌀 Irritability
- 🌀 Upset stomach/GI distress

SOURCE: Gunnar & Quevedo (2007); McEwen (2000, 2007)

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Impact on Our Health: Long Term

- 🌀 Immunological (increased inflammation)
- 🌀 Infections (upper respiratory system infections)
- 🌀 Chronic diseases (hypertension, GI conditions)
- 🌀 Mental health (anxiety, depression)
- 🌀 Cognitive (difficulty concentrating, impaired decision making, mistakes)
- 🌀 Aging (cellular degeneration)

SOURCE: Rothschild (2006)

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Impact on Our Job Performance

- 💧 Increases feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, apathy, cynicism
- 💧 Decreases your ability to listen carefully & negotiate conflict
- 💧 Decreases your creativity & problem solving
- 💧 Decreases your empathy and kindness
- 💧 Increases performance errors; decreases productivity

SOURCE: Lipsky (2009)

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Impact on Our Organizations

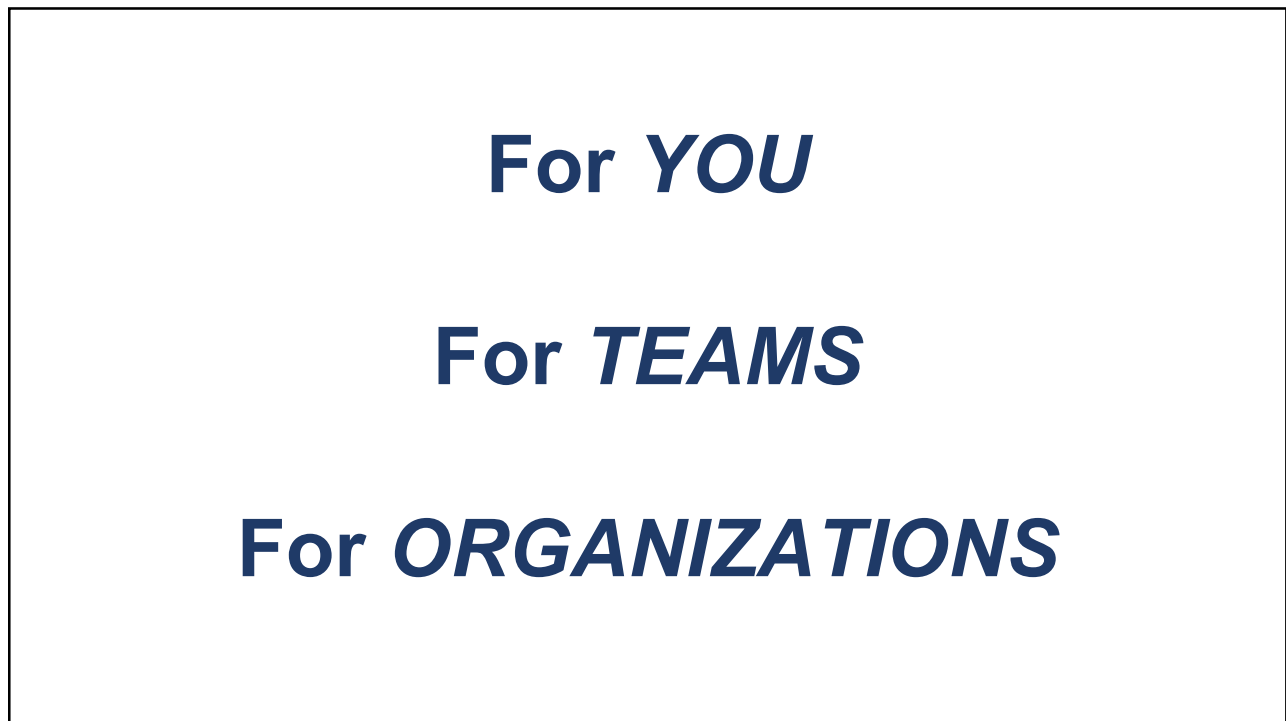
- 💧 Affects the overall culture and performance of your organization
- 💧 Permits short-cuts and low-quality work to become the norm
- 💧 Decreases respect for colleagues & people you serve
- 💧 Decreases collaboration and cooperation

SOURCE: Lipsky (2009)

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For You: In the Moment



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For You: In the Moment

BREATHE



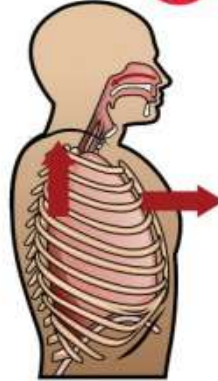
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Anatomy of Breath

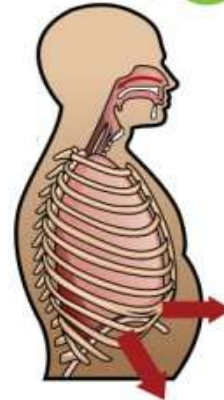
Chest Breathing

- Utilizes chest
- Breath is shallow
- Heightened stress response
- Increase toxins
- Less oxygen to brain
- Overtaxes other body parts

Upper Chest Breathing



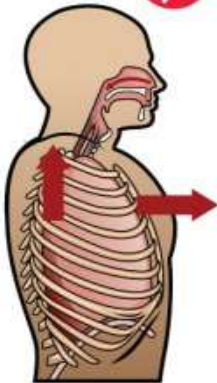
Belly Breathing



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Anatomy of Breath

Upper Chest Breathing



Belly Breathing



Diaphragmatic Breathing

- Engages the diaphragm
- Stimulates the vagus nerve
- Reduces heart rate
- Reduces jittery feelings
- Reduces mental fog

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For You: In the Moment

Take Five

Take five diaphragmic breaths while tracing the outline of your hand



at your desk, under the table, red lights, in zoom meetings

Doorknob Breathing

Take a diaphragmic breath at every doorknob throughout your day



front door, meeting door, office door, microwave handle, refrigerator handle

CREDIT: Amy Jeanguenat, Mindgen

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For You: Daily Routines

- 1 Get enough sleep
- 2 Maintain eating schedule
- 3 Get light exercise
- 4 Vary the work that you do
- 5 Do something you enjoy
- 6 Focus on what you do/did well
- 7 Learn from your mistakes (be gentle with yourself)
- 8 Laugh
- 9 Create quiet moments for reflection
- 10 Practice gratitude

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For You: Creating Work Boundaries



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For You: Creating Work Boundaries

- ☒ Create a routine & ritual for *starting* work (make it a conscious act, talk to yourself as you do it)



50

For You: Creating Work Boundaries

- ☒ Create a routine & ritual for *starting* work (make it a conscious act, talk to yourself as you do it)
- ☒ Allow yourself to feel what you need to feel *during* work time



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- ☒ Create a routine & ritual for *starting* work (make it a conscious act, talk to yourself as you do it)
- ☒ Allow yourself to feel what you need to feel *during* work time
- ☒ Discuss challenging experiences, cases, feelings with colleagues *during* work time



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- ☒ Create a routine & ritual for *starting* work (make it a conscious act, talk to yourself as you do it)
- ☒ Allow yourself to feel what you need to feel *during* work time
- ☒ Discuss challenging experiences, cases, feelings with colleagues *during* work time
- ☒ Create a routine & ritual for *ending* work (make it a conscious act, talk to yourself as you do it)



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- ☒ Create a routine & ritual for *starting* work (make it a conscious act, talk to yourself as you do it)
- ☒ Allow yourself to feel what you need to feel *during* work time
- ☒ Discuss challenging experiences, cases, feelings with colleagues *during* work time
- ☒ Create a routine & ritual for *ending* work (make it a conscious act, talk to yourself as you do it)
- ☒ Leave work at work, especially if you socialize with work colleagues during non-work time



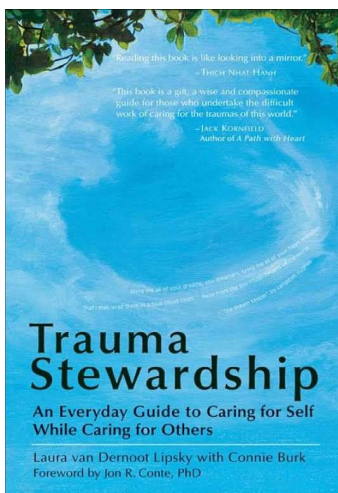
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For You: Getting Support

I can't *BREATHE* my way
through this anymore.

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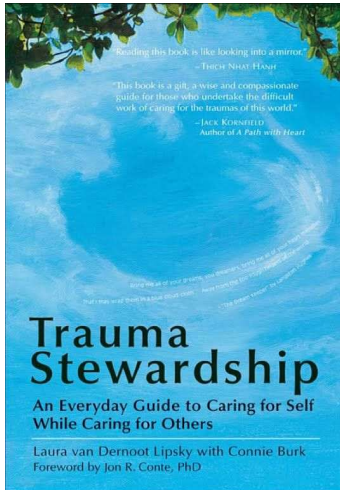
Warning Signs



- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. Feeling helpless and hopeless | 9. Dissociative moments |
| 2. A sense that one can never do enough | 10. Sense of persecution |
| 3. Hypervigilance | 11. Guilt |
| 4. Diminished creativity | 12. Fear |
| 5. Inability to embrace complexity | 13. Anger and cynicism |
| 6. Minimizing | 14. Inability to empathize/numbing |
| 7. Chronic exhaustion/physical ailments | 15. Addictions |
| 8. Inability to listen/deliberate avoidance | 16. Grandiosity |

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Warning Signs



1. Feeling helpless and hopeless
2. A sense that one can never do enough
3. Hypervigilance
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5. Inability to embrace complexity
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7. Chronic exhaustion/physical ailments
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9. Dissociative moments
10. Sense of persecution
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12. Fear
13. Anger and cynicism
14. Inability to empathize/numbing
15. Addictions
16. Grandiosity

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Self-Assessment Tools



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Self-Assessment Tools

Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL)

Compassion Satisfaction and Compassion Fatigue
(ProQOL) Version 3 (2009)

When you [help] people you have direct contact with their lives. As you may have found, your compassion for those you [help] can affect you in positive and negative ways. Below are some questions about your experiences, both positive and negative, as a [helper]. Consider each of the following questions about you and your current work situation. Select the number that honestly reflects how frequently you experienced these things in the last 30 days.

1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Very Often

1. I am happy.
2. I am preoccupied with more than one person I [help].
3. I get satisfaction from being able to [help] people.
4. I feel connected to others.
5. I jump or am startled by unexpected sounds.
6. I feel invigorated after working with those I [help].
7. I find it difficult to separate my personal life from my life as a [helper].
8. I am not as productive at work because I am losing sleep over traumatic experiences of a person I [help].
9. I think that I might have been affected by the traumatic stress of those I [help].
10. I feel trapped by my job as a [helper].
11. Because of my [helping], I have felt "on edge" about various things.
12. I like my work as a [helper].
13. I feel depressed because of the traumatic experiences of the people I [help].
14. I feel as though I am experiencing the trauma of someone I have [helped].
15. I have beliefs that sustain me.
16. I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with [helping] techniques and protocols.
17. I am the person I always wanted to be.
18. My work makes me feel satisfied.
19. I feel worn out because of my work as a [helper].
20. I have happy thoughts and feelings about those I [help] and how I could help them.
21. I feel overwhelmed because my case [work] load seems endless.
22. I believe I can make a difference through my work.
23. I avoid certain activities or situations because they remind me of frightening experiences of the people I [help].
24. I am proud of what I can do to [help].
25. As a result of my [helping], I have intense, frightening thoughts.
26. I feel "bogged down" by the system.
27. I have thoughts that I am a "success" as a [helper].
28. I can't recall important parts of my work with trauma victims.
29. I am a very caring person.
30. I am happy that I chose to do this work.

© B. Hudnall Storms, 2009. Professional Quality of Life: Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Version 3 (ProQOL).
www.austlii-elsevier.com or www.proqol.org. This test may be freely copied as long as (a) author is credited, (b) no charges are made, and (c) it is not sold.

WHAT IS MY SCORE AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

In this section, you will score your test so you understand the interpretation for you. To find your score on each section, total the questions listed on the left and then find your score in the table on the right of the section.

Compassion Satisfaction Scale

Copy your rating on each of these questions on to this table and add them up. When you have added them up you can find your score on the table on the right.

3. _____	_____
4. _____	_____
12. _____	_____
16. _____	_____
18. _____	_____
20. _____	_____
22. _____	_____
24. _____	_____
27. _____	_____
30. _____	_____
Total: _____	_____

The sum of my Compassion Satisfaction questions is	And my Compassion Satisfaction level is
22 or less	Low
Between 23 and 41	Moderate
42 or more	High

Burnout Scale

On the burnout scale you will need to take an extra step. Burnout items are "reverse scored." If you scored the item 1, write a 5 beside it. The reason we ask you to reverse the scores is because scientifically the measure works better when these questions are asked in a positive way though they can tell us more about their negative form. For example, question 1, "I am happy" tells us more about the effects of helping when you are not happy so you enter the score

Write to	the effects
1. _____	of helping when you are not happy so you enter the score
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____
4. _____	_____
5. _____	_____
6. _____	_____
7. _____	_____
8. _____	_____
9. _____	_____
10. _____	_____
11. _____	_____
12. _____	_____
13. _____	_____
14. _____	_____
15. _____	_____
16. _____	_____
17. _____	_____
18. _____	_____
19. _____	_____
20. _____	_____
21. _____	_____
22. _____	_____
23. _____	_____
24. _____	_____
25. _____	_____
26. _____	_____
27. _____	_____
28. _____	_____
29. _____	_____
30. _____	_____
Total: _____	_____

The sum of my Burnout Questions is	And my Burnout level is
22 or less	Low
Between 23 and 41	Moderate
42 or more	High

Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale

Just like you did on Compassion Satisfaction, copy your rating on each of these questions on to this table and add them up. When you have added them up you can find your score on the table on the right.

2. _____	_____
5. _____	_____
7. _____	_____
9. _____	_____
11. _____	_____
13. _____	_____
14. _____	_____
23. _____	_____
25. _____	_____
26. _____	_____
28. _____	_____
Total: _____	_____

The sum of my Secondary Trauma questions is	And my Secondary Trauma level is
22 or less	Low
Between 23 and 41	Moderate
42 or more	High

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For You: Getting Support

 Shame & Stigma



This literally happens to everyone

 Career Consequences



VT negatively affects your job performance

 Employee-Based Services



Are often very good (or work with private provider)

 Time



This is usually short-term work, like PT

 It Won't Help



It does, you won't always feel this way

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For Your Team



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For Your Team

- 1 Assume everyone on your team is experiencing VT



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For Your Team

- 1 Assume everyone on your team is experiencing VT
- 2 Support daily routines & boundaries



63

For Your Team

- 1 Assume everyone on your team is experiencing VT
- 2 Support daily routines & boundaries

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- ☒ Discuss challenging experiences, cases, feelings with colleagues *during* work time



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For Your Team

- 1 Assume everyone on your team is experiencing VT
- 2 Support daily routines & boundaries

HOW are you talking about your cases?



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For Your Team

- 1 Assume everyone on your team is experiencing VT
- 2 Support daily routines & boundaries
- 3 Re-examine roles and responsibilities

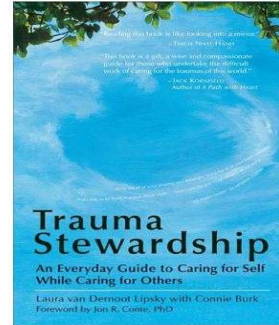


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For Your Team

- 1 Assume everyone on your team is experiencing VT
- 2 Support daily routines & boundaries
- 3 Re-examine roles and responsibilities

Warning Signs



4. Diminished creativity



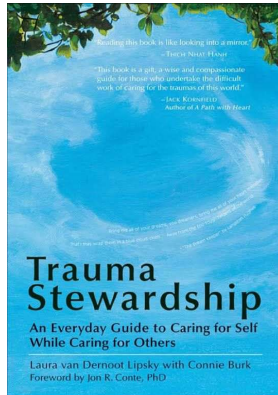
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For Your Organization

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For Your Organization

1 Training, education, workshops



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For Your Organization

1 Training, education, workshops

2 Support daily routines & boundaries

For You: Daily Routines

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| 1 Get enough sleep | 6 Focus on what you do/did well |
| 2 Maintain eating schedule | 7 Learn from your mistakes (be gentle with yourself) |
| 3 Get light exercise | 8 Laugh |
| 4 Vary the work that you do | 9 Create quiet moments for reflection |
| 5 Do something you enjoy | 10 Practice gratitude |

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- ☒ Create a routine & ritual for *ending* work (make it a conscious act, talk to yourself as you do it)
- ☒ Leave work at work, especially if you socialize with work colleagues during non-work time

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For Your Organization

- 1 Training, education, workshops
- 2 Support daily routines & boundaries
- 3 Vary work assignments & schedule breaks



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For Your Organization

- 1 Training, education, workshops
- 2 Support daily routines & boundaries
- 3 Vary work assignments & schedule breaks
- 4 Normalize seeking support & create on-ramps to those programs



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For Your Organization

- 1 Training, education, workshops
- 2 Support daily routines & boundaries
- 3 Vary work assignments & schedule breaks
- 4 Normalize seeking support & create on-ramps to those programs
- 5 Long-term organizational commitment

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For Your Organization



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For Your Organization

Introduction

It takes courage to help child and adult victims of sexual abuse, assist survivors of acts of terrorism and mass violence, fight fires that may have taken people's lives, or respond to shootings and other crime scenes. It also takes commitment to do this work despite the personal, physical, emotional, and mental impact it can have.

The *Vicarious Trauma Toolkit* (VTT) was developed on the premise that exposure to the traumatic experiences of other people—known as **vicarious trauma**—is an inevitable occupational challenge for the fields of victim services, emergency medical services, fire services, law enforcement, and other allied professionals; however, organizations can mitigate the potentially negative effects of trauma exposure by becoming vicarious trauma-informed.

The VTT includes tools and resources tailored specifically to these fields that provide the knowledge and skills necessary for organizations to address the [vicarious trauma](#) needs of their staff. To begin exploring the VTT, select one of the disciplines below and visit the comprehensive [Compendium of Resources](#).

Victim Services



EMS



Fire Services



Law Enforcement



Introduction

[Message From the Director](#)

[About the Toolkit](#)

[Where Do We Begin?](#)

[The VT-ORG and Compendium](#)

[What is the VT-ORG?](#)

[What is the Compendium?](#)

[Compendium of Resources](#)

[Tools for Victim Services](#)

[Tools for EMS](#)

[Tools for Fire Services](#)

[Tools for Law Enforcement](#)

[Glossary of Terms](#)

[References](#)

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Concluding Thoughts

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Get your boots.

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Thank You! Questions?

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