

**Assessment of and Plans to Address
Vicarious Trauma in Public Health
Nurses in the Healthy Families
Directorate at Toronto Public Health**

Care for the Caregiver

Presentation to:
2nd National Conference for Community Health
Nurses
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What is Vicarious Trauma?

- A natural human consequence of working with people who have experienced extremely stressful and traumatic life events
- The cumulative impact of working with clients who have trauma histories
- The transformation of the inner experience as a result of empathetic engagement with the trauma material of clients
- A potential occupational risk.

Why are Nurses Working With High Risk Families in the Community Vulnerable to Vicarious Trauma?

- We often work with people under acute or chronic stress who have lost their own ability to cope, coming primed with anxiety, fear and a lack of control.
- The "cost of caring" (being empathic and sensitive) for others in emotional pain.
- Insufficient recovery time

Why are Nurses Working With High Risk Families in the Community Vulnerable to Vicarious Trauma?

- Children are the most vulnerable members of our society.
- We perform a number of concrete functions, but the essential product we deliver is ourselves.
- Human need is infinite. We tend to feel " I can give a little more" but sometimes we simply cannot help.
- We may have unresolved issues activated by similar issues we see in our clients.
- We often work alone in the community

What have we done about this in the Healthy Families Service area at Toronto Public Health

- Formation of a vicarious trauma committee
- Survey of all direct service staff
- Initial set of recommendations
- Literature review
- Development of a position statement
- Education for all staff (managers and direct service)
- Development of a second set of recommendations

Why conduct a survey?

- Find out how much HF staff are experiencing vicarious trauma
- Find out some factors related to vicarious trauma for HF staff
- Give HF staff an opportunity to share their work experiences
- Inform recommendations for organizational intervention strategies

What else did we measure?

In addition to vicarious trauma, we also measured:

- **Burnout** - a state of emotional exhaustion often brought on by emotionally demanding situations.
- **Compassion satisfaction** - refers to the positive feelings derived from the work of helping others.

Are HF staff experiencing vicarious trauma, risk of burnout, and compassion satisfaction?

- Staff respondents had **higher vicarious trauma scores** than average
- Staff respondents had **slightly lower risk of burnout scores** than average
- Staff respondents had **close to average compassion satisfaction scores**

Perceived Exposure to Client Trauma

- The greater respondents' perceived exposure to client trauma
 - the greater their vicarious trauma score
 - the greater their risk of burnout score

Perceived Social Support

- Respondents were asked to indicate how much support for their work they received from
 - family and friends
 - co-workers
 - manager/supervisor
 - organizational policies and procedures.
- Respondents indicated that they received the most support from co-workers, and the least amount of support from organizational policies and procedures

Perceived Social Support

- The greater respondents' overall perceived support
 - the lower their vicarious trauma score
 - the lower their risk of burnout score
 - the greater their compassion satisfaction score.

Recommendations

- A. Recognize and Manage, Where Possible, Staff Exposure to Trauma
- B. Increase Management's Ability to Support Staff in Order to Address Vicarious Trauma
- C. Increase Staff Opportunities for Co-worker/Peer Support

Recommendations

- D. Education and Training for Staff
- E. Organizational Policies & Procedures to Support Staff and Reduce the Impact of Vicarious Trauma
- F. Increasing Access to Professional Support
- G. Further Research

Literature Review Findings

The two most important strategies for the management of vicarious trauma are peer support and reflective practice.

Other Suggestions From the Literature

- A workplace that acknowledges vicarious trauma as an occupational risk for helping professions
- Increased capacity for staff to recognize and deal effectively with client situations that could be vicariously traumatizing
- Development of an organization which fosters self care

- Caseload management strategies
- Development of a support system for staff who have been involved in a potentially traumatizing event
- Enhancements that will support self care for staff who have been involved in a potentially traumatizing event

Toronto Public Health Position Statement

The Toronto Public Health Healthy Families Service Area acknowledges that:

- The work that we do requires empathy, compassion and sensitivity. We also acknowledge that it is these very same requirements of our work that increase our risk for vicarious trauma.
- Vicarious trauma is a potential occupational risk which research indicates is associated with exposure to the past and present trauma experienced by the clients that we serve.

- Vicarious trauma is in no way the fault of our clients and can occur regardless of the level of competence or experience of the service provider. Vicarious Trauma is a potential effect of working with survivors of trauma.
- The work that we do has an impact on us both personally and professionally.

Therefore the Healthy Families
Service Area of Toronto Public
Health is committed to:

- Policies and practices that support Healthy Families staff to mitigate their risk for vicarious trauma as well as reduce its impact.

Objectives for the Education Session

1. To raise and/or increase awareness of vicarious trauma and occupational stress reactions and their potential effects on staff in the Healthy Families Service Area.
2. To enhance the existing repertoire of personal and professional self-care strategies in order to mitigate the possible effects of vicarious trauma and other occupational stress reactions in the Healthy Families Service Area.

Agenda for the Day

- Stress and our Work
- Occupational Stress Reactions
- What is Vicarious Trauma & Risk Factors
- BREAK
- Constructivist Self Development Theory
- Factors that Contribute to Vicarious Trauma
- LUNCH
- Addressing Vicarious Trauma
- Ecological Model for the Prevention of Vicarious Trauma
- BREAK
- Reflective Practice
- A Letter to Myself, Relaxation Exercise

Evaluation Comments

- “ This workshop has given me lots to think about. It is a relief to find words and theories to describe what I am experiencing”
- “This is really important information that all helping Professionals should know”

- “Thanks for reminding us about self care and to feel good about it”
- “I will be sure to remember to encourage us to be supportive of each other”

- “This workshop has validated the need for reflective practice”
- “Thanks for the excellent workshop. Occupational stress is often a topic area that is not addressed very well”

Second Set of Recommendations

- Reflective practice
- Peer support (pre & post incident)
- Expertise sharing
- Staff training and education
- Team building
- Work environment



Questions