THE THERAPIST & VICARIOUS TRAUMA

As a therapist, you are at risk for vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma (VT) is what happens to your own cognitive, physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual health as a result of repeated exposure to the trauma of others, while having to control your reaction (from Vicarious Trauma Institute at http://www.vicarioustrauma.com).

It is not possible to listen to the stories of trauma survivors and not be changed. VT is a job hazard for trauma therapists. Your beliefs can be challenged. You may lose trust or hope. You may feel depressed or anxious as a result of listening to the experiences of those you help. You may become preoccupied with someone you help. You feel “on edge.” You may have developed an exaggerated startle response. You may have distressing dreams or intrusive thoughts about your clients or their experiences. You may be unable to recall parts of your work with trauma victims. You may find it difficult to separate your personal life from your professional life. You may have more headaches than usual. You avoid certain activities or situations because they remind you of your client’s experiences, or your own. Are you under or overeating? Are you having difficulty talking about your feelings? Are you more irritable than usual? Are you having difficulty falling or staying asleep? Are you worried that you are not doing enough for your client? Feeling trapped? Feeling hopeless?

Vicarious trauma is a normal human reaction; it is NOT an indication that you, the therapist, are incompetent or that there is something wrong with you. VT can be exacerbated by the magnitude of the event, your proximity to the event, and by your own life circumstances.

Vicarious trauma can outstrip your resources and coping skills, just like anyone else. You are human. If you’re involved in providing early EMDR interventions in your community, the crisis these clients experienced may be in your own back yard.

Vicarious trauma is not the same as “burnout.” Burnout accumulates over time and is often resolved by a vacation or job change. On the other hand, VT goes with you wherever you go and will not be resolved by a change in circumstances.

You can learn how to navigate the “perils” of VT. To prevent serious problems, know your limits, and stick to them. Maintain connections with other professionals who can provide support. Exercise, eat right, take time off, sleep, do something fun. Participate in available support and consultation. Take a breath. Get more training if you need it. Take the afternoon off. Seek your own trauma therapy. Give yourself credit for your strengths and successes. Remind yourself of your priorities. Practice self-compassion. Reduce your case load temporarily. Don’t watch the news. Take a “virtual” shower to rinse off the residue. Watch a funny cat video on YouTube. Turn off your phone when you get home. Take a break. Ask for help.

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