

Vicarious Trauma:

The results of working with Sexual Assault Survivors



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What is Vicarious Trauma?

“The profound psychological effects of working with the sexually victimized, effects that can be disruptive and painful for the helper and can persist for months or years after work with traumatized persons”

~ (McCann and Pearlman, 1990, p.133)



Signs and Symptoms

- Fatigue, exhaustion
- Irritability
- Jumpy, anxious
- Difficulty sleeping
- Losing sleep over clients, or dreaming about them and traumatic events
- Lack of job satisfaction
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Reliving client's traumatic events

Affects on Personal & Professional Life

Personal

- Low self-image
- Loss of interest
- Detachment from others
- Disruption in cognitive schemas (trust, safety, esteem, intimacy)
- Guilt, or survivor's guilt
- Powerlessness

Professional

- Avoidance of work, or clients
- Increase in job errors
- Low motivation
- Staff conflict
- Detachment from professional roles
- Decrease in quality or quantity

Risk Factors

- Caseloads
- Personal History of Trauma
- Lack of training for working with the sexually victimized
- Lack of social and professional support

Protective Factors

- Proper Training
- Social Support
- Professional Support
- Excellent supervision
- Strong Coping skills and self-care strategies
- Resilancy

Self-Care & Coping

- Stress management
- Accessing social support through friends, family, significant others
- Emotional Health
 - Writing, journaling, coloring, music, mindfulness
- Physical Well- being
 - Exercise
 - Healthy eating

Some Implications for Social Work

- Can lead to burnout
- High turnover in the field
- Can negatively impact interactions with clients and coworkers

References

- Baird, S., & Jenkins, S. R. (2003). Vicarious traumatization, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout in sexual assault and domestic violence agency staff. *Violence and Victims, 18*(1), 71-86.
- McCann, I. L., & Pearlman, L. A. (1990). Vicarious Traumatization: A Framework for Understanding the Psychological Effects of Working with Victims. *Journal Of Traumatic Stress, 3*(1), 131.