

Secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma: the transformation of the professional's inner experience as a result of empathic engagement with survivor clients and their trauma material.



# Research on Trauma Workers vs. General Population

## General public

- Optimistic
- Under-estimate the likelihood of experiencing trauma

## Trauma professionals

- Pessimistic Realism
- Accurately estimate the likelihood of experiencing trauma

What percentage of the population experience trauma during their lifetime?

# Examples of trauma reactions

## Re-Experiencing

Dreams; distress when reminded of trauma; intrusive thoughts; flashbacks

## Avoidance

Feelings of detachment; efforts to avoid activities associated with trauma; “forgetting” parts of trauma; decreased interest in usual activities

## Increased Arousal

Sleep disturbance; irritability; anger outburst; trouble concentrating; hypervigilance; exaggerated startle response

# What trauma responses might look like in providers

- Re-experiencing clients' traumas intrusive thoughts of clients, distressing dreams about clients
- Avoidant responses coming to work late, forgetting to return calls, forgetting a client's story, not "hearing a client's story"
- Increased arousal sleep disturbance, irritability, difficulty concentrating
- Shattered worldview belief the world is an unsafe place

# Variables that influence the helper's experience with secondary trauma

## The Situation

- work setting
- caseload
- nature of trauma
- social, political, cultural context of the work

## The Helper

- professional identity
- resources
- support
- personal history
- current life circumstances
- coping style

# Areas of vulnerability for secondary traumatic stress

- Safety
- Trust/Dependency
- Control
- Esteem
- Intimacy
- Loss

# How trauma work impacts our sense of safety

- Facing the reality of living in an unsafe world
- This may cause us to begin to question:
  - Our personal safety
  - The safety of our families



# How this work affects our sense of trust

- Abuse is a violation of “trusting” relationships
- “Nice people” may be abusers
- Lose faith in our own judgment
- Difficulty trusting others



# How this work affects our sense of control

- Helplessness in working with survivors
- Recognition of the difficulty in controlling what happens to people
  - try to over-control our lives
  - give up on control

# How this work affects our sense of esteem

- Carry shame for our clients
- Carry shame for humanity
- Our work may make us feel:
  - overwhelmed
  - stupid
  - inadequate
  - frustrated
  - incompetent



# How this work affects our sense of intimacy

- Violations of intimacy
- Fear associated with relationships – may lead to avoidance
- Others don't understand us
- Stop discussing work due to frustration
- Isolation may result

# How this work impacts our sense of loss

- Seeing real/feared loss every day
- Personal losses may cause us to:
  - overreact
  - de-value our own loss as “less important” than those faced by our clients

How do we prevent or reduce the effects of secondary traumatic stress?

“Paradoxically, your work is part of the antidote to vicarious traumatization.” \*