

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS' RESILIENCE AND TRAUMA TRAINING

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

What is trauma?

Children and adolescents understand this idea best as “when bad things happen.” Many kinds of events and situations are included, such as:

- natural disasters, accidents, community violence, political and social upheaval, poverty, physical and mental disabilities, and medical procedures;
- separations, abandonment, loss, multiple transitions and disruptions, or having an uncertain future; and
- experiences in key relationships, including emotional neglect and abuse, and physical neglect and abuse--including intentional harm, as well as not receiving what is necessary for growth and well-being.

The intensity and severity of a person's response to these bad things are strongly affected by how many happen at once, how basically strong or vulnerable the person is to stress, how long the traumatic experience(s) lasts, and how much the person perceives the bad thing as a threat to one's life or basic needs. If there have been several traumatic experiences over time, the person can develop a cumulative reaction to them.

What is vicarious traumatization (VT)?

Working with—or having some contact with—children and adolescents who have had or are having “bad things” happen to them is very difficult and stressful work. In fact, various studies confirm that human service workers who work with traumatized clients face a potential occupational hazard—they are themselves at greater risk of suffering lasting negative effects from their human services work.

How are we more vulnerable? The trauma experts who initially named and studied the problem of vicarious traumatization (VT), Laurie Ann Pearlman, Ph.D. and her colleagues, underscore that human service workers are at risk of VT through their empathic care for others.

How does this happen? Connecting with others and caring for them is a natural and honorable quality--we share this as human beings. The risk of VT does not come out of the act of caring itself, but in having direct or indirect contact with traumatic material while caring for others. This is not the clients' fault, but just a fact when working in the human services field. The fact of wanting to help, and having the responsibility to help, can intensify the human service worker's distress, especially when faced with their clients' suffering.

When VT reactions occur, they are viewed as predictable and universal, not pathological. VT reactions can be felt at work, at home, and in one's relationships with others and with oneself. VT reactions can also be cumulative across time and clients.

What are the main negative effects of VT?

They include:

- *unwanted intrusive imagery*
 - visual images, strong feelings, or body sensations that are associated with traumatic material
- *distressing changes in one's experiences of basic needs and beliefs*, especially involving:
 - safety
 - control or choice
 - trust
 - intimacy
 - self-esteem
 - responsibility
- *distressing changes in how one knows and thinks about oneself, including one's:*
 - sense of identity
 - general capacities for coping and solving problems
 - relationship to spirituality
 - perceptions about the world

What are some risk factors that increase a human service worker's vulnerability to VT?

Research has shown that these are some of the most common:

- cumulative demands and stress occurring at work, at home, and in one's community
- one's personal history of trauma
- one's limited training and supervision, or undeveloped professional ideals
- one's struggles with managing feelings
- being relatively new to working in the human services
- working with traumatized children

However, having some of these risk factors does not necessarily mean one will suffer from VT. Instead, please consider using this knowledge as a preventive measure, and engage in antidote actions that lower the potential negative impact of these risks (see below for some ideas about how to do this).

How can human service workers prevent, reduce, and heal VT?

1. In all that you do, **P.A.C.E.** yourself by being:

- **Playful** take opportunities to be light, relaxed, spontaneous
- **Accepting** strive to be nonjudgmental and unconditional in your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires
- **Curious** practice being open to discovery, interested, comfortable with not knowing
- **Empathic** explore the world of the other person; express yourself with sincerity and enthusiasm

2. Strive to follow the “**A.B.C.’s**”, and help your co-workers do the same:

- **Awareness:**
 - Be aware that VT is a real possibility
 - Promote and develop your capacity for compassionate and wise self assessment
 - Make good and healthy decisions
 - Be attentive and mindful
 - And when you forget, just gently return to being aware
- **Balance:**
 - Honor your inner life
 - Engage in activities that help you hold steady physically & emotionally
 - Balance your work and personal life
 - Cope proactively, think ahead
 - Actively nourish your physical, emotional, social, spiritual well-being
 - Create a sanctuary for rest and restoration for yourself and others
- **Connection:**
 - Build and support a culture of steady caring and support
 - Sustain a compassionate stance toward yourself, your co-workers, and your clients
 - When you find yourself disconnected, reach out for help from people you trust

3. Use strategies & advocate for what you need in three key areas:

- ***Personal strategies***
 - Live a satisfying personal life
 - Take care of your body
 - Participate in your spiritual and home community
 - Give & receive love
 - Maintain clear boundaries between home & work
 - Pursue more formal help if you struggle with doing these
- ***Professional strategies***
 - Pursue adequate education, training, & peer support
 - Engage in self-protective behaviors
 - Vary your professional duties when you can
 - Avoid isolating yourself—find support
- ***Organizational/work place strategies***
 - Improve & maintain the quality of the physical & social work environment
 - Encourage an atmosphere of respect & support
 - Advocate for having a variety of work tasks
 - Take sufficient time off when possible
 - Institute opportunities for work-related support & supervision