



Mental health in infancy and early childhood affects social functioning, psychological well-being, and physical health throughout life.

Vicarious Trauma

Summary of October 2012, Best Start Webcast, Greg Lubimiv, E.D. Phoenix Centre for Children and Families

Vicarious trauma refers to changes in one's inner self as a result of working long term with individuals living in difficult situations or who have experienced trauma. Vicarious trauma does not occur because a staff member has had a bad or difficult day or week. It occurs when this exposure is long term or permanent. Vicarious trauma is the result of the empathetic relationships the individual builds with clients and indirect exposure to trauma through these relationships.

Vicarious trauma is different from:

- Burnout – physical and emotional exhaustion from extended stress. This is short term and relatively easy to remedy.
- Secondary trauma or indirect trauma: immediate reaction from having heard of a traumatic incident.

There are several signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma. It is important to remember that these will be unique to the individual. These symptoms will remain present for a long period of time and impact every aspect of an individual's life.

- Heart problems
- Anxiety allergies
- Weakened immune system
- Nervous ticks
- Cancer
- Stroke
- Ulcers

- Addictions
- Poor self-esteem
- Bowel issues
- Difficulty managing emotions
- Not ok with self
- Unclear boundaries
- Powerlessness
- Taking on too much responsibility
- Hypervigilance
- Accident prone
- Fear
- Memory lapses
- Increased sensitivity to violence
- Decrease in pleasurable activities
- Redirecting conversations that create stress
- Cynicism
- Absence from work



There are several environmental conditions that can protect from and prevent vicarious trauma.

- Safety
- Sense of belonging
- Consistency/predictability
- Opportunity
- Acceptance/love
- Hope

When conditions at work, home and within the community align together, they provide the highest level of protection. The presence of all of the above environmental conditions is highly protective.

In addition to these, the following can help prevent vicarious trauma on an individual level.

- Being self aware
- Being able to ask for support
- Balancing work and home
- Using self care strategies
- Being open to learning and growing
- Being optimistic
- Being able to set boundaries
- Being able to express feelings appropriately
- Having an available support system
- Having a balanced diet
- Exercising
- Maintaining social connections outside of work
- Setting personal goals
- Developing hobbies/interests
- Using time management strategies
- Connecting with positive peers

In the work setting:

- Creating a positive work setting
- Having clear and consistent policies and procedures
- Having adequate resources
- Creating an atmosphere where errors equal learning
- Taking opportunities to recognize and value staff

- Maintaining open and clear communication
- Offering professional development opportunities
- Offering effective and regular supervision focusing on learning and growing
- Building humour and fun into the workplace
- Promoting diverse and balanced case loads
- Debriefing all major incidences
- Using reflective practice
- Providing access for support to staff

Being aware of vicarious trauma and ways to identify it within a work place are important steps to prevent it from occurring. Working with young children and their families can be extremely rewarding, but can also be difficult. The more that staff within workplaces recognize these two sides, they will then be able to create an atmosphere that is supportive, healthy, and effective.

Upcoming Conferences

Together for Change

Children's Mental Health Ontario Conference

November 18-19, 2013 Toronto, Ontario

http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/news_and_events/event-action-detail-aid-1201.htm

Zero to Three

National Training Institute

December 11-14, 2013 San Antonio, Texas

<http://www.regonline.com/builder/site/Default.aspx?EventID=1185937>

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