

Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, and Compassion Fatigue

This issue of Migration Matters looks at the impacts that trauma in the workplace can have on service providers. This info sheet also offers tools and resources for burnout, vicarious (or secondary) trauma, or compassion fatigue.

Definitions

Burnout

The World Health Organization conceptualizes burnout not as a medical condition but as an occupational phenomenon that results from “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.”¹ The primary symptoms of burnout include: 1) **constant fatigue, exhaustion, or lack of energy**; 2) **reduced productivity** (including problems with memory or concentration, as well as less initiative or motivation); and 3) **negative feelings towards one’s work** and distancing the self from the job.² Other symptoms can include problems with sleep, increased substance use, and relationship problems.

The Five Stages of Burnout³



Vicarious or secondary trauma

Vicarious trauma is the possible impact of an individual being continually exposed to other people’s stories or experiences of trauma and violence. Usually this would occur in a workplace setting (e.g. trauma counsellors) and would impact a person over an extended period of time.

Someone experiencing vicarious trauma may have their whole worldview shaken based on what they see and hear on a daily basis. For example, someone who works with survivors of intimate partner violence over a long period of time may begin to doubt the existence of healthy and loving relationships.

Vicarious trauma is different from re-traumatization or the triggering of existing trauma. Many folks who work in social services do so because they themselves have experienced hardships (e.g. many folks in the settlement sector have their own immigrant or refugee experience). If someone has themselves experienced trauma and hearing of similar trauma on the job is bringing back memories, intrusive thoughts, or other symptoms, that is **not** vicarious trauma. That is a trauma response.

Compassion fatigue (CF)

CF is defined as “a state of exhaustion and dysfunction...as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress” (p. 253).⁴ This can occur when an individual does emotionally heavy work (e.g. supporting many clients through suffering or grief), is deeply emotionally invested in their work, and are unable to maintain **compassion satisfaction** (often because of institutional, bureaucratic or systemic limitations).

Compassion satisfaction refers to the pleasure an individual derives from their work.⁵ This satisfaction can come from different places, including having supportive coworkers, a positive work environment, and/or feeling like one’s work makes an impact.

Warning signs of compassion fatigue⁶

Emotional	Physical	Interpersonal
Irritability, sadness, anxiety, anger	Chronic physical symptoms (headaches, GI symptoms, dizziness)	Feeling helpless, powerless or hopeless
Detachment or numbness	Sleep difficulties	Isolating or withdrawing
Feeling hypersensitive or less empathetic	Fatigue (leading to reduced productivity & motivation)	Relationship conflicts

Measurements

These phenomenon are measured through self-measurements. Burnout has been largely measured by the self-description questionnaire called the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and, more recently, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory has been introduced. The Professional Quality of Life Measure (ProQol) measures compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue. It is available in 26 languages.

References

- ¹ WHO. (2019, May 28). Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases
- ² Vitango. (2015). Five stages of burnout.
- ³ Figley C. (1995). Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized. Brunner/Mazel; Bristol, UK: 1995.
- Compassion fatigue as secondary traumatic stress disorder: An overview in CR Figley
- ⁴ ProQol. (2019). Professional Quality of Life Measure
- ⁵ CAMH. (n.d). Is there a cost to protecting, caring for and saving others? Beware of Compassion Fatigue

Risk Factors

Organizational factors	Individual factors
Vicarious Trauma ⁷	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Lack of support after experiencing traumatic content at work ◇ Constant, intense exposure to trauma/ suffering with little variation in work tasks ◇ Insufficient orientation, ongoing training, and guidance on the job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Prior traumatic experiences ◇ Lack of support system (in the workplace and in their personal life) ◇ Avoidance of emotions ◇ Newer employees or those less experienced (which could be more common in organizations with high turnover)
Burnout ⁸	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Unclear job expectations ◇ Unhealthy workplace dynamics ◇ Lack of variation in work tasks (monotony) or a constantly chaotic workplace ◇ Lack of resources or control over outcomes ◇ High workloads, having to work over-time or come in on days off 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Lack of support system ◇ Lack of work-life balance/ over-identifying with your work ◇ Working in a helping profession ◇ Lack of delegation or shared responsibility (i.e. trying to be everything to everyone)

What you can do as an individual⁹

While there are many systemic and organizational factors leading to burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue that may be outside of our control, there are steps we can take to ensure overall health.

Take the “**Three R**” approach to avoiding burnout:
 Step 1: **Recognize** the signs
 Step 2: **Reverse** the damage by seeking help & taking a step away
 Step 3: **Resilience** building to better cope with future

- Have a work-life balance and take sufficient time off.
- Build a strong support system, both outside of work and with coworkers.
- Talk to the people in your life. Consider also adding a mental health professional, such as a counsellor, to your support system.
- Learn to [set boundaries](#) and delegate work where possible.
- Learn your triggers and signs that you need to step back.
- Seek out supervision and support whenever possible.
- Don't forget to take care of your basic physical needs!

References

- ⁷OVC. (n.d.) [The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit](#)
⁸Mayo Clinic. (2018). [Job burnout: How to spot it and take action](#)
⁹Smith, M., Segal, J. and Robinson, L. (2020). [Burnout Prevention and Treatment. Help Guide.](#)
¹⁰OVC. (n.d). [Blueprint for a Vicarious Trauma-Informed Organization](#)

What your organization can do

There are several things that can be done on an organizational level to minimize burnout and mitigate the impacts of exposure to secondary trauma¹⁰:

- Ensuring there are measures in place for regular debriefing.
- Allowing flexible work schedules and mental health days to promote work-life balance and destigmatize occupational mental health struggles.
- Having ongoing conversations about vicarious trauma, burnout, compassion fatigue, and mental health within the organization.
- Having an open line of communication where employees can weigh in on policies or practices that may be harmful to their wellness.
- Where possible, working in teams and having supervision available to avoid isolation.
- Minimizing how often people are asked to stay over-time, are contacted outside of their work time, and/ or how often people are asked to work on their days off.
- Having comprehensive training and orientation for new employees and ongoing training, professional development, and supervision for all employees.
- Ensuring there is counselling available that employees can access if necessary (e.g. an Employee Assistance Program).

Resources for Management

- * [Guarding Minds at Work](#)
- * [Blueprint for a Vicarious Trauma-Informed Organization](#)
- * [Psychologically Safe Leader Assessment](#)
- * [Developing a Workplace Plan](#)

Resources for Individuals

- * [Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#)
- * [The Ten Laws Governing Healthy Caregiving](#)
- * [The Caregiver's Bill Of Rights](#)
- * [Infographic: Avoiding Burnout at Work - Mind Tools](#)
- * [Fact Sheet: Vicarious Trauma - American Counselling Association](#)

This *Migration Matters* info sheet accompanies the AMSSA e-learning module: Settlement Worker's Self-care and Boundaries