



Too Much, Too Many, Too Long: What is Vicarious Trauma and What to Do about it

First responders including police, firefighters, EMS as well as dispatchers and victim advocates are compromised of incredibly resilient individuals who excel at bouncing back from stress and adversity. However, as first responders to the distress and suffering of others, these individuals are also at a particularly high risk of developing vicarious trauma (also known as compassion fatigue). One way to think about compassion fatigue is as “emotional residue” from hearing the trauma stories, or witnessing traumatic events happen to others (American Counseling Association). If we think about stress and trauma as contagious, then it makes sense how continued exposure may put first responders at a greater risk. Another way to think about is “too much, too many, too long.” As part of their day-to-day work, first responders may experience, too much (high intensity of traumatic calls), too many (high number of traumatic calls) and too long (prolonged exposure to traumatic calls). This continued exposure can begin to chip away to even the strongest emotional armor. Below we discuss some ways which you can decontaminate yourself from the effects of vicarious trauma.

Strategies for combatting vicarious trauma:

- Seek out social support. When experiencing stress and trauma our bodies begin releasing chemical stress hormones. Spending time with friends, family and loved ones creates a buffer against the negative effects of stress.
- Utilize your resources. Utilize whatever resources you have available to you including family, friends, spiritual advisors, mental health professionals and your peer support team.
- Talk about it or write it down. To process a traumatic event it is important that you share your thoughts. Talk to a friend, coworker, peer supporter, therapist or even the family pet! An alternative is to write down your thoughts (you don't have to keep the writing, it's the process that matters).
- Make stress reduction and exercise a priority. Downtime is essential. Avoid burnout by regularly engaging in activities you find pleasurable and that allow you to recharge. Find an exercise you enjoy to prevent build up of stress chemicals in your body. The time you least want to engage in stress relieving actives is the most important time to do it.
- Respond to the psychological trauma the same way you would respond to a physical trauma: You wouldn't judge yourself for needing a doctor's assistance resetting a broken bone so don't judge yourself if you need assistance resetting after a psychological trauma. It is acceptable to take time off.
- Believe in your community. Look for ways to regain a sense of control and personal empowerment
- Re-evaluate how you are doing. Monitor changes in functioning related to concentration, appetite, mood, and sleep.
- Don't engage in self-blaming or a negative cycle of “what if's.” Instead focus on the factors that you can control, and recognize/accept what you cannot control.
- Don't dwell on asking yourself “why.” “Why” questions can generate a sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness.
- Set boundaries around social media and news media coverage. Constant exposure can be exhausting and re-traumatizing.

References

American Counseling Association. Vicarious Trauma Fact Sheet. Retrieved July 1st, 2018.