



Facilitator Tips:

TAKING CARE OF SELF: THE CUMULATIVE TOLL OF TRAUMA



In her book, *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky writes, “I had to find some way to bear witness to trauma without surrendering my ability to live fully.” After years of working with people experiencing trauma, Laura found herself standing on the edge of a cliff looking out over a beautiful view of the Caribbean and thinking, “I wonder how many people have jumped?” and “Where would the Life Flight helicopter land? Where is the nearest trauma hospital?” When she shared these thoughts with her family, she was shocked to find out she was the only one. That was the watershed moment when she realized how deeply and fundamentally she was affected by the cumulative toll of supporting those dealing with trauma.

Laura’s work with the Trauma Stewardship Institute focuses on breaking down the silence and shame that often accompany recognizing the effect of trauma exposure. There are many cultural, organizational, familial, and individual beliefs that contribute to the silence around the impact of working with trauma. Beliefs such as, “Only the weak are affected,” “If you’re having a hard time, you’re not cut out for the work,” or “If you care enough about your cause, you won’t be affected,” are tied to the myth that good helpers are able to provide for others without needing anything in return. Laura’s teachings emphasize that everyone is affected, no matter how dedicated or well-trained. As a facilitator, it’s vital to make self-care a priority so that you can be present and available for yourself and the participants, hopefully for many years to come.

Here are some indicators of the trauma exposure response, defined by Laura as, “the transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings or the planet.”

Which, if any, of these resonate for you — either in the grief support group setting or your outside life?

- Feeling hopeless or helpless
- A sense that you can never do enough
- Hyper vigilance/Anxiety (Sensitivity to noise/movement, always on the lookout for danger, easily startled)
- Diminished creativity
- Minimizing (Either your experience — “My hard times are nothing compared to...” or someone else’s — “How can she be having such difficulties? It was only her grandmother who died”)
- Chronic exhaustion/physical ailments
- Inability to listen/deliberately avoiding talking to others
- Dissociative moments (Spacing out during group, responding robotically without a connection to your own emotional experience)
- Sense of persecution (“Everyone is making my life difficult”), guilt, and/or fear
- Anger and cynicism
- Inability to empathize/numbing
- Addictions (Food, alcohol, adrenaline, screens, etc)
- Grandiosity: An inflated sense of importance related to one’s work (“No one can do it like I can/I can’t trust anyone else, so I’ll just do it myself”)

While it’s common to experience many of these indicators to some degree, you can use the skill of awareness to keep tabs on if they become intrusive. Here’s an example: it’s not unusual for new facilitator to say, “I’m noticing that if my partner/friend/child is late, I feel anxious until I hear from them.” After listening to so many stories of death, it’s almost unavoidable for us to be more aware of what can happen to people. However, if a facilitator starts to restrict their partner or child’s activities or becomes



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unable to focus on other tasks when someone is a few minutes late, additional self-care is warranted.

Self-care is one of those terms that can mean many different things, depending on who you are and how you normally respond to intense or stressful situations. You may already have habits or rituals that you rely on to, as Laura says, “Metabolize that which you have been exposed to.” Maybe you wash your hands immediately after group or listen to loud music on the ride home. Whatever personal rituals you’ve created, if they work, keep at them. You might also consider building in new strategies to help your nervous system process the stories of loss and pain in order to make your facilitator experience more sustainable.

Here are some suggestions for ways to attend to your nervous system:

Do something physical after group — shoot a few hoops, jump on the trampoline, go up and down the stairs a few times, walk around the building, play foosball, etc.

Focus on your breath. Studies repeatedly show that intentional deep breathing helps calm your body’s fight/flight/freeze response. You can do this throughout group, at the beginning of post-meeting, just before you head home, or anytime that works for you.

Take a moment to tune into the emotions and thoughts you experience while listening to the stories in group. We can be so quick to push our feelings aside in the name of being present for others, but

acknowledging these responses helps you stay connected to your own experience. It also enables you to make more informed choices about what you need, rather than doing so in a daze or numbing out. Laura jokes about how if you’re going to numb out with sugar, alcohol, caffeine, or television, try to expand the pause before doing so. In other words, if you normally grab a cup of coffee and something sugary after group, try to wait 10-15 minutes before eating and drinking.

Create a gratitude practice. This might seem trite given how saturated popular culture is with catchy phrases of thanks, but research again supports that conscious gratitude shifts our thinking and our neurobiology. Sometimes we have to dig deep to find anything we’re grateful for, but it’s worthwhile to come up with two or three things at least once a day. Perhaps this is something you do privately, keeping a journal or thinking of them on your way to/from group, or maybe it’s something you share with the other volunteers.

This Facilitator Tip is a quick glimpse into the trauma exposure response and ways to effectively care for yourself in the face of that exposure. You might also consider reading *Trauma Stewardship* by Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky, who says so eloquently, “We know as stewards, we create space for and honor others’ hardships and suffering, and yet we do not assume their pain as our own.”



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

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Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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