

Vicarious Trauma and Burn-out: Strategies for Survival- The Impact of High Risk Work on Workers

**Conference on Children as Victims and Witnesses of Domestic
Homicides: Lessons Learned From the Ontario Domestic
Violence Death Review Committee**

**London Convention Center
November 2, 2006**

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***WHY SHOULD WE BE
CONCERNED ABOUT
VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND
BURN-OUT?***

BURN-OUT

- ◆ Burn-out is the depletion of our resources, both physical and psychological, caused by our desire to achieve certain standards and expectations that are often impossible to humanly achieve. At some point, we become overwhelmed with the knowledge it's not possible - and cynicism, pessimism and negativity sets in. Burn-out can happen to anyone at home or on the job.

Symptoms of Burnout

- ◆ Withdrawal from, and cynicism toward clients and others
- ◆ Emotional and physical exhaustion
- ◆ Various psychological symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, sadness, and lowered self-esteem

Early Symptoms of Burnout – 1st Stage (Livingston-Booth, 1985)

- ◆ The speeding up of activity:
 - ◆ drink and eat more quickly on the job or on the run
 - ◆ feel under the pressure of time, can't catch your breathe or catch up on the demands
 - ◆ feel as if you are driven

Later Symptoms of Burnout – 2nd Stage

- ◆ Disrupted sleep
- ◆ Over-reactions to difficulties
- ◆ Increased irritability
- ◆ A less reliable memory
- ◆ Beginning of physical symptoms such as tension headaches, muscle pain, lowered immune system....

Traumatic Cases for Front line Workers and High Risk Families

- ◆ Domestic violence
- ◆ Sexual assault
- ◆ Child abuse
- ◆ Abductions
- ◆ Homicides

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- ◆ **Vicarious trauma (VT)** is the short and long-term consequences of working with trauma victims/survivors and the painful and disruptive effect this can have on the trauma worker. The effects in all of the following areas – physically, emotionally, behaviorally, cognitively, spiritually – it can persist for months and sometimes even years after work with traumatized clients **without** effective intervention.
- ◆ With repeated exposure to traumatic imagery, workers may begin to incorporate an accumulation of clients' traumatic material into their own view of self and the world

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN

BURN-OUT and

- ◆ Cumulative
- ◆ Predictable
- ◆ Builds over time
- ◆ Results in work dissatisfaction
- ◆ Unaddressed leads to serious health problems

VT

- ◆ Narrower focus
- ◆ Harmed by the kind of work we do
- ◆ Intrusive imagery
- ◆ Changes the meaning of life
- ◆ Affects our world view

Especially how it affects our world view

- ◆ Shattered assumptions about basic beliefs in our world for safety, security, trust, justice
- ◆ Repeated exposure to the cruelty of others to innocent victims
- ◆ Heightened awareness of vulnerability and the fragility of life
- ◆ Powerlessness of victim transferred to worker
- ◆ Sense of alienation develops

“I love my work but lately I find it contaminating my personal life.

I have nightmares about the horrible things I hear about from clients. My sex life has deteriorated, I'm irritable and distractible, I'm afraid for my kids and tend to overprotect them, and I don't trust anybody anymore. I don't know what is happening to me.”

Advocate/counsellor

“It actually feels good to hear that I am not the only one who feels depressed and helpless and that these issues are worth studying. Fortunately, the stress has decreased with experience and time for me, but I still have vivid memories of quite traumatic experiences representing victims of domestic violence who were so betrayed that it was difficult to continue to have faith in humankind.”

A lawyer

“It’s hard dealing with child victims when they are the same age as the ones you have at home”

Police Officer

JUDGES SPEAK OUT

Some of the things 56
Canadian judges told U.S.
psychologist Isaiah
Zimmerman about their jobs:

“Cases of horrible, sexual, predatory exploitation of children haunt me. I keep my balance and my job as a judge by profoundly guarding myself against being swept away by the gruesome evidence I have to confront.”

“It’s no fun to be disliked in a small community where you also need to be a member of the church, the neighbourhood and raise your kids.”

“So little of our work involves legal issues to be truly adjudicated. At our level in family court, we are the dumping ground for massive social and economic issues and the acts of very dysfunctional families. I feel I am more a social worker than a judge.”

“I always take work home. I’m the workaholic. I work evenings, seven days a week. If I didn’t do it, I’d be hopelessly behind. You speak of control? I can’t even control the thermostat in my courtroom.”

“I wasn’t prepared for the isolation of this position. It slowly overtakes you, and then you realize indeed how alone often you are, despite your friends and family.”

“You’re always on – except in the sanctuary of your home. You watch in public what you say, how you appear, where you appear.”

“The sheer volume of each day’s work makes me fear I’m just processing people and have lost touch with my better self. Am I becoming indifferent to horror?”

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**“I better call the
Children’s Aid, then I
realize I am the Children’s
Aid”**

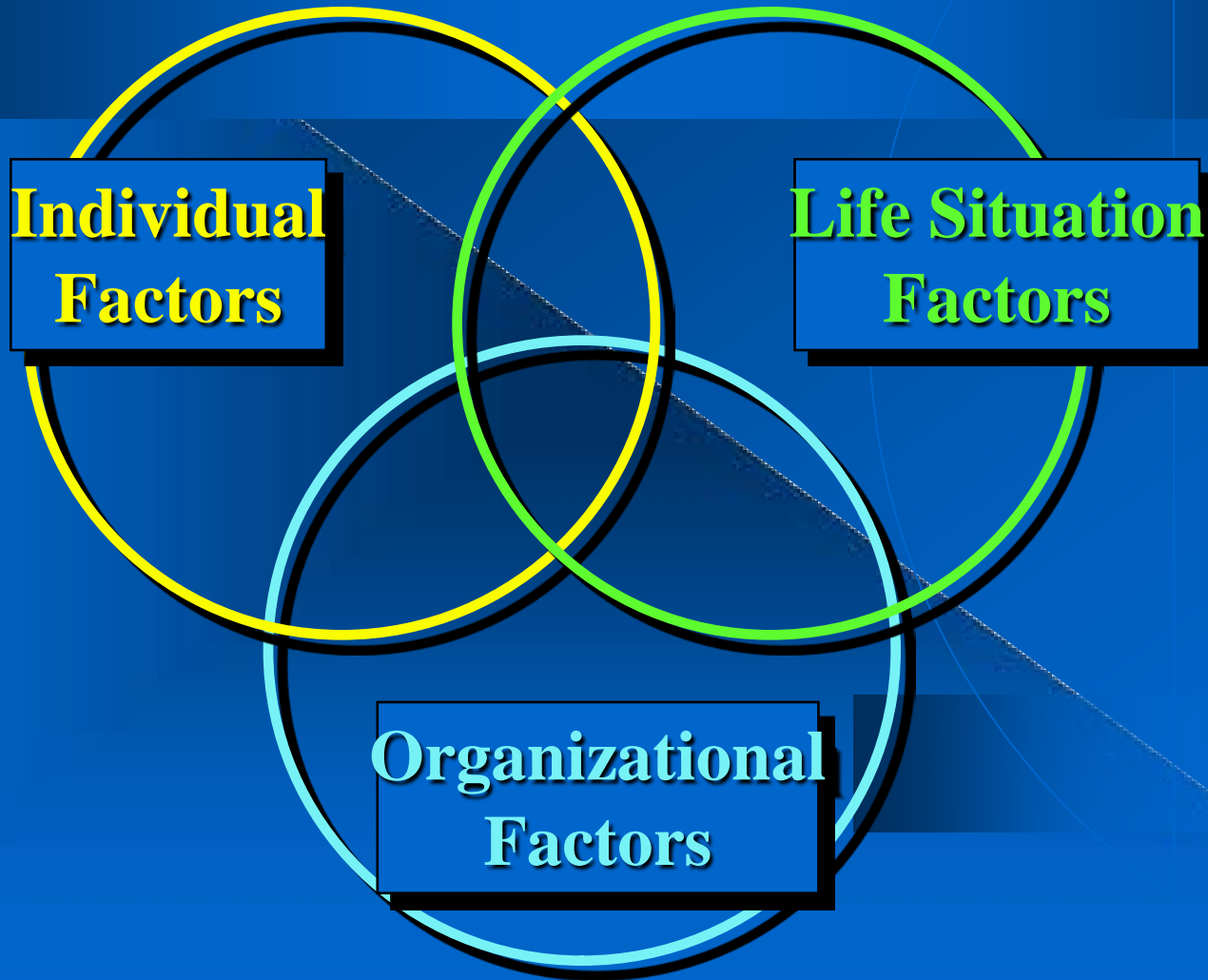
Child Welfare Supervisor

STAGES OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- 1. Numbness and Shock**
- 2. Confusion-nothing makes sense**
- 3. Renewed Hope and Resilience**



Factors that Influence a Person's Vulnerability to Vicarious Trauma



Prevention – General Principles


- ◆ Become aware of symptoms of stress before they become severe
- ◆ Establish clear, realistic stress management goals
- ◆ Incorporate all the support and planning necessary to make it work
- ◆ The challenge is to find the optimal level of stress each of us requires in order to thrive.

Barriers to Self-care are many...

*“Take my advice,
I am not using it”*



PERSONAL STRATEGIES

- ◆ Good nutrition that fuels us
 - ◆ Exercise that strengthens us
 - ◆ Rest that renews us
 - ◆ Self awareness that makes us wiser
 - ◆ Life skills that equip us to cope better
 - ◆ Social connection with others
 - ◆ Spiritual development that gives us meaning and purpose in our lives
- 

PROFESSIONAL and ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

- ◆ Supportive policies that recognize the high risk nature of our work
- ◆ Acknowledgement of the connections between individual and work-related stresses
- ◆ Meaningful supervision, consultation and peer support
- ◆ Balancing our workload and creating a variety of tasks
- ◆ Good boundaries/limit setting
- ◆ Proactive plans for coping

PROFESSIONAL and ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

- ◆ Comfortable physical work setting
- ◆ Opportunity for formal and informal debriefing on difficult situations
- ◆ Programs that respond to stress, critical incidents and wellness
- ◆ Getting support/help when we need it (EAP)
- ◆ Bringing humour, laughter and celebration of victories into our work
- ◆ Work culture that abundantly expresses appreciation and positive regard for workers

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH VT

- ◆ **Name the problem**
- ◆ **Normalize the experience**
- ◆ **Break the silence and shame surrounding it**
- ◆ **Build the topic into the curriculum**
- ◆ **Build a supportive network**
- ◆ **Provide an opportunity for debriefing (group & individual)**
- ◆ **Provide opportunity for VT supervision (help worker to sort out VT, Burn-out and CT reactions)**
- ◆ **Provide specialized educational programs**
- ◆ **Provide good role models and mentors (Experienced workers need to speak out)**
- ◆ **Create organizations that recognize and respond to VT well**

Study Results: Prevention Strategies

- ◆ “The first day on the job ensure that coping strategies are in place.”
- ◆ Peer support (seek experienced peers)
- ◆ Limit work hours
- ◆ Don't take work home
- ◆ Find alternative community groups involved with young people

Study Results: Coping Strategies and Resilience

- ◆ Balance
- ◆ Exercise
- ◆ Humor
- ◆ Positive community activities
- ◆ Professional development
- ◆ Faith/spiritual life
- ◆ Channeling our outrage into social and political change

Positive Impacts of Our Work are many....

“ It is a privilege to be in the presence of survivors – to witness their courage , their strength and their commitment to healing themselves and our world. It is also a privilege to be in the company of all of us here for those very same reasons....”

Remember

*“To keep the lamp burning we
have to keep putting oil in it.”*

By Mother Teresa