Management Tip

Becoming a Vicarious Trauma-Informed Organization

Introduction

Vicarious Trauma is a term that identifies the emotional residue of exposure that providers have from working with people as they are hearing their trauma stories and becoming witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured (Perlman & Saakvitne, 1995). It can have a negative impact on a provider both personally and professionally. The impact varies from feeling "burned out" and unmotivated – all the way to feeling a sense of overall hopelessness and pessimism about their work.

For decades now, literature has demonstrated that this is a common issue that direct-service providers experience. Fortunately, there are factors that can mitigate the negative impact that vicarious trauma has on someone. One significant factor is the type of organizational support that is offered. In fact, when staff perceive their organization as being adequately supportive, it can lower their levels of vicarious trauma (WCSAP, 2004).

There are many strategies that organizations can adopt to become "vicarious trauma-informed." It is recommended that these strategies are built into policies and practices to ensure prioritization and consistency. Here are a few to consider as a starting point (from the Office for Victims of Crime):

Consider the workplace environment

- Seek to create opportunities for collaborations between staff members
- Offer time to connect with peers outside of work hours
- Include a variety of job tasks to allow for breaks in giving direct service
- Maintain realistic expectations and demands – this encourages staff to take breaks and can prevent them from feeling overwhelmed
- Imbed self-care into the workday

Support newer employees

- Ensure adequate time for orientation and training
- Check in with newer employees often to answer questions and offer context

Offer quality leadership with mutual respect

- Provide consistent, scheduled time for supervision
- Respect the experience that direct-service staff have and take into consideration their suggestions and concerns
- Regularly express appreciation for the work being done
- Continue to ask what they need from you to feel supported

Resources

- [Vicarious Trauma Training for Managers](#), recorded webinar
- [Organizational Readiness Guide](#), including a comprehensive survey to assess your organization's response to vicarious trauma
- [Engaging in Culturally Response Leadership](#), management tip
- [Vicarious Trauma Toolkit](#)

References

Office for Victims of Crime (n.d). *The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit.* https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/blueprint-for-a-vicarious-trauma-informed-organization

Pearlman, L. A., & Saakvitne, K. W. (1995). *Treating therapists with vicarious traumatization and secondary traumatic stress disorders.* In C. R. Figley (Ed.), *Brunner/Mazel psychological stress series, No. 23. Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized* (p. 150–177). Brunner/Mazel.

Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (2004). *Vicarious Trauma and Its Impact on Advocates, Therapists, and Friends*. https://www.wcsap.org/sites/default/files/uploads/resources_publications/research_advocacy_digest/RAD_v6_i2.pdf