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How to Address Vicarious Trauma in the Workplace

Mateo Sánchez Morales

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By twenty20photos

Working in the nonprofit sector can be incredibly rewarding. And sometimes, some of

what feels so rewarding may include working closely with and providing services to individuals who have experienced trauma. This can sometimes lead to emotional challenges in the workplace, including vicarious trauma.

When it's hard to separate oneself from a client and their trauma, learning how to recognize, address, and manage vicarious trauma is essential to ensuring that we can be our best selves and continue showing up for those we work with. But what exactly is vicarious trauma, and how can you deal with it? Here is an overview of this condition and tips for how to manage it when it comes up in the workplace.

Burnout vs. compassion fatigue vs. vicarious trauma

Burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma are concepts that are often used interchangeably, but they have unique and essential differences:

- By definition, burnout is a condition in which an individual develops depression-like symptoms as a result of their job, typically brought on by prolonged or repeated stress. Some ways of dealing with burnout include establishing boundaries at work or improving your work-life balance.

- Compassion fatigue refers to the way that employees who directly assist people with trauma may develop their own Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of empathizing with clients. This can be somewhat alleviated by having a sense of humor, focusing on positive aspects of your life, and taking breaks.

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- Vicarious trauma refers to experiencing trauma-like symptoms and having a profound shift in worldview when working with clients who have traumatic experiences.

If you think you are experiencing any of these conditions, I recommend seeking the advice of your mental health provider or other qualified health professional.

What separates vicarious trauma from burnout and compassion fatigue is that vicarious trauma manifests itself as trauma in our bodies. Although all three of these conditions show up in similar environments and symptoms may overlap, the distinctions are important to consider since addressing each requires different resources. Here's how you can specifically address vicarious trauma.

Mindfulness in the workplace

With vicarious trauma, the most important thing is to talk about it. It's natural and normal, and can even be an expected part of advocacy work involving victims of trauma. Rather than shy away from this reality, you should expect your workplace to provide employees with the tools and resources to address this issue when it arises. By receiving education and training, employees are able to name their experience and provide a framework to better understand and respond to it.

Building connections

Nothing is worse than feeling like you're alone in dealing with these issues. Having people to talk to about what's going on and to relate to while doing your job can significantly help reduce the symptoms of vicarious trauma. Building connections with teammates as well as with other organizations doing similar work can help to alleviate the feelings of hopelessness and allow you to identify a network of support.

Creating safe places

In order for employees to feel adequately supported, it is crucial to create a culture of caring. Having a trauma-informed workforce is an essential first step toward showing employees that they are in a safe place while doing difficult work. If your workplace is not providing internal support and resources to address vicarious trauma, you should feel empowered to seek it out and ask questions. Perhaps your organization has outside

resources and opportunities for staff to participate in wellness-related activities.

Working in the nonprofit sector and advocating for victims of trauma is not easy, and not having the adequate support to tend to your mental health can make things even harder. Addressing employees' mental health should be a priority for employers. And this is especially true for employees of color or those with identities that reflect the people they are serving. If your organization does not provide you with the support you need to do your job, consider pursuing a job that values your contributions by providing you the tools you need to do your work. No job is worth compromising your mental health over.

To better understand vicarious trauma and how to care for yourself while caring for others, consider obtaining a copy of The Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others.

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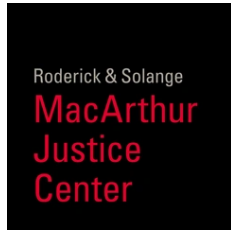
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