THE COST OF CARING: STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING RESILIENCE

MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE School of Law

The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet. (Naomi Rachel Remen, MD)

What Happens When Helping Gets Hard?

There are often emotional, psychological, and physical impacts of working in the caring professions – particularly when working with survivors of human trafficking and other types of serious trauma. Learning ways to tap into the power of resilience and how to implement a trauma-informed framework while supporting staff self-care is critical to addressing these impacts, which frequently result in compassion fatigue, burnout, and vicarious trauma:

- **Compassion Fatigue** is a deep erosion of one's compassion and ability to tolerate strong emotions/difficult stories in others. Sometimes described as having "nothing left to give" or the "cost of caring." Signs include isolating oneself, loss of pleasure, physical and mental fatigue, bottling up emotions, and feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness.
- **Burnout** is the physical and emotional "erosion" one experiences due to prolonged stress and frustration in the workplace, frequently described as being unsatisfied, powerless, and overwhelmed at work or within systems. Symptoms include increased anxiety, depression, reduced work performance, numbness, and jadedness. Frequently, burnout is a sign that one should consider an exit strategy or whether a decision needs to be made regarding continuing in one's current professional position.
- **Vicarious Trauma** occurs when an individual has repeated exposure to the pain, fear, terror, and trauma of others that changes their view of the world. Symptoms may mirror those of traumatized clients, including anger and irritability, addictive or compulsive behaviors, and having one's worldview and sense of purpose compromised.

Elements of A Trauma-Informed Framework

Service providers frequently ignore the symptoms of secondary trauma, forgetting their vulnerability and Internalizing the views that self-care are issues for "others" and that providers need to persevere. Efforts to provide legal and social services to trauma survivors should be based on a knowledge and understanding of trauma and the inclusion of trauma-specific interventions in your organization and in your daily practice. The generally accepted trauma-informed approach or framework includes the four **"R's":**

- A **Realization** about trauma and how it affects individuals, families and groups;
- An ability to **Recognize** the signs of trauma;
- The creation of an appropriate organizational **Response** to trauma, including a willingness to change organizational language, culture, behaviors, and policies; and,
- Building a commitment to **Resist Re-traumatization** of clients and staff.

A fifth **"R"**—or **Refresh**—creating an organizational approach that prioritizes making space for those in the helping fields to reflect and replenish, is essential to doing this work and doing it well.

Prioritizing Space for Reflection and Self-Care

Self-care is essential to the emotional well-being of service providers and is an important tool to recharge your battery and sustain one's ability to support trauma affected individuals. Several immediate strategies that can be integrated into one's regular routine include:

- **PAUSING TO TAKE A BREATH:** Structured breathing exercises bring oxygenated air to the deepest parts of the lungs, interrupting stress reactions. Breathing deeply, with a slow and steady inhalation to exhalation ratio, signals our parasympathetic nervous system to calm the body down. Research shows it has far-reaching impacts on the brain, influencing regions critical for emotions, learning, and memory, affecting the biological markers of stress, and synchronizing activity in and between the brain regions involved in emotion and memory.
- **REMEMBERING YOUR "WHY" (PURPOSE):** What do you value? Why do you do this work? What is your core purpose? Regularly reflecting on your "why" is as critical as your efforts to support others. Creating space and time to pause and identify your "why" also helps you see how **you are making a difference.**
- **TAKING TIME FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT & SELF-CARE:** Assessment and self-care help service providers recognize symptoms of compassion fatigue, burnout and vicarious trauma. Awareness is the first step to sustainable change and liberation! There are many types of worksheets, surveys, and other tools that can help individuals take a step back and reflect on their level of stress and make plans to bolster their mental and physical well-being. Also, prioritizing self-care allows for helping professionals to do the work well, we must not pour from an empty cup; pour from the OVERFLOW!

Individual and Organizational Resources

- **The Journey2Well, LLC** helps individuals and organizations connect to resources, training opportunities, and supportive tools and services to aid caring professionals in their healing journey. In particular, the **Self-Care Toolkit** has multiple tools, including videos and information sheets on stress reduction approaches, for individuals service providers grappling with the impact of being in the caring profession. Resources available at https://thejourney2well.com.
- The **Vicarious Trauma Toolkit** (Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime) has specific resources and recommendations for victim service providers and first responders looking to address vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue at the individual and organizational level. The website includes a compendium of over five hundred examples webinars, assessments, other tools produced by agencies around the country. See https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/blueprint-for-a-vicarious-trauma-informed-organization.
- The **Lawyer Assistance Program** (Maryland State Bar Association) hotline provides free, confidential assistance to legal service providers in Maryland. See https://www.msba.org/health-and-wellness/.

This tip sheet was created as a part of the **Human Trafficking Prevention Project (HTPP),** a collaboration between the University of Baltimore School of Law and the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS).

Recommendations on this tip sheet are adapted from the HTPP webinar: *"The Cost of Caring and Strategies for Promoting Resilience,"* featuring guest presenter Lauren Jenkins, LCPC of Anchored Hope Therapy and Hope ignited Training. The webinar is available at: https://mvlslaw.org/ht/resources/#trainings

For additional information on the cost of caring, contact:
Lauren N. Jenkins, LCPC, LaurenJ@anchoredhopetherapy.com; Thejourney2well@gmail.com

For more information on the HTPP, please contact:
HTPP Director Jessica Emerson at jemerson@ubalt.edu or 410-837-4566
HTPP Manager Heather Heiman at hheiman@mvlslaw.org or 443-451-4075