



City of Madison EAP Office

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*The City's external EAP
provider is available 24/7*

The Benefit of Debriefings and Self-Care

Debriefings are a demonstrated practice to decrease overall instances of stress and vicarious trauma. Stress with no outlet can cause physical and psychological health problems, impact families, increase substance abuse, and decrease our overall wellness now and/or down the road. It is for these reasons we provide employees and their families with confidential, voluntary, and a wide variety of accessible and relevant services, and promote activities to build resiliency.



Strategies for Self Care

Individuals who choose to work with people in crisis should assess their personal level of vulnerability to vicarious trauma based upon their current personal situation, history of emotional distress and depression, past experiences with trauma and violence, as well as the effectiveness of current support systems.

A personalized self-care plan should fit into one's lifestyle, personality, resources, and interests. An effective self-care plan should address the whole person – physically, emotionally, behaviorally, and spiritually and include stress reduction activities in which a person will regularly and habitually engage.

Prevention Steps

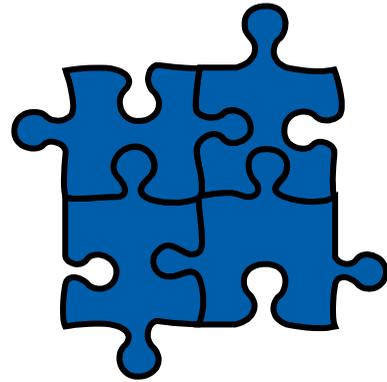
- Pre-incident training – have an idea of what to expect
- Pre-incident preparation – become involved with the organizations and agencies involved in crisis response and learn their culture, policies and procedures
- Set personal and professional boundaries and stick to them
- Take days off
- Time-limited shifts
- Accept duties within the scope of your experience and training
- Develop connections with other response professionals who are able to provide appropriate support
- Take advantage of opportunities for formal intervention during and after the interaction
- Advocate for establishing formalized systems of promoting self-care within your work environment if these do not exist
- Pay attention to physical needs
- Make sure you are asking for and accepting care from your social support network
- Participate in events that provide meaning and a sense of completion to your response efforts

Vicarious Trauma

It is difficult to absorb the sadness and trauma of another person, and these empathic engagements can cause fatigue and traumatic stress symptoms. Vicarious trauma is a natural reaction resulting from exposure to the information and feelings of a traumatic event or sudden loss experienced by others. It is NOT direct trauma, but the accrual of exposure to other people's trauma. It can be acute or post-traumatic.

Vicarious Trauma reactions, also referred to as Secondary Trauma or Compassion Fatigue, resemble first-hand reactions and responses to traumatic stress, with symptoms including:

- Sleeping problems
- Nightmares
- Intrusive thoughts, memories and flashbacks
- Hyper-vigilance
- General anxiety and anxiety attacks
- Isolation and disconnection
- Substance abuse and high risk behaviors
- Changes in appetite and sex drive
- Irritability and depression
- Cynicism, negativity and apathy about life and the world



Compassion Fatigue

Vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue are often used interchangeably, as many symptoms overlap. However, some professionals differentiate between them in order to better understand how someone is experiencing their stress, and how to best help them cope, heal, and build resiliency (Robinson, 2016). Individuals experiencing more social and emotional symptoms may identify more as having compassion fatigue, and can be impacted in the following ways:

- Coping mechanisms become overwhelmed
- Reduced effectiveness of caregiver
- Helplessness
- Detachment from co-workers not involved in the work
- Detachment from family and friends
- Shortened tenure as service provider

Burnout

Dr. Charles Figley (1995) distinguishes caregiver burnout from compassion fatigue by pointing out that burnout primarily has to do with one's work and develops gradually. According to Figley, compassion fatigue comes on more quickly than burnout and is more responsive to solutions. Compassion fatigue may develop from over-identification with the suffering of others. It is important to train managers, first responders, and crisis workers to recognize the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue.

Organizational Response

Organizations need to support their employees who work or volunteer in emotionally demanding situations. Supervisors, board members, deacons, and staff need to be educated about vicarious trauma and its potential implications. Vicarious trauma needs to be discussed without judgment or disdain, and its potential impact needs to be understood and normalized as part of a healthy organization. An effective organization will recognize that working with victims places extraordinary demands on employees and volunteers and prioritize care for these special people.

Building Resiliency

Resiliency can be seen as a collection of strengths and skills in the following areas (Benard, 2014):

- Social Competence
- Problem-Solving
- Autonomy
- Sense of Purpose/Belief of Bright Future

Knowing these strengths and identifying areas of growth may assist in overcoming future stressors, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and/or burnout.

Exercise: Enjoyable exercise following a critical incident can have positive effects on your body as you recover from the activation of your stress response. In building resiliency and preparing for the next stressor you will face in your work or life, exercise, when not overdone, can be seen as a physical challenge that activates your stress response in a safe and a more enjoyable way. This experience allows the individual to have control over the duration, intensity, time, and overall outcome (Lovallo, 2016).

Bonnie Benard (2014). *The Foundations of the Resiliency Framework*. <https://www.resiliency.com/free-articles-resources/the-foundations-of-the-resiliency-framework/>

Charles Figley (1995). *Compassion Fatigue*. Bristol, PA.

William R. Lovallo (2016). *Stress and Health: Biological and Psychological Interactions*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Teresa M. Robinson (2016). *Predictive Factors of Compassion Fatigue Among Firefighters*. Walden University.