Mindfulness Practices for Direct Service Providers to Victims of Crime

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A Few Minutes of Mindfulness

• Arrive HERE:
  • In your body,
  • In your breathe,
  • In you mind,
  • In this room,
• With these people.
The Emotional Challenge in Working with Crime Victims.

- Bearing witness to violence, abuse, and trauma is emotionally challenging.
- Having an emotional response to working with crime victims is natural and virtually unavoidable.
- But, “secondary” or “vicarious” trauma, if not dealt with skillfully, can turn into “burnout” or even vicarious traumatic stress disorder also known as “compassion fatigue.”
- Compassion fatigue can lead to long lasting emotional issues in your personal and professional life and result in leaving the field.
Vicarious Trauma

• Vicarious Trauma is a “state of tension and preoccupation of the experiences described by clients.”

• Vicarious trauma happens because you care about other people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them. Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being.
Exercise: Exploring Vicarious Trauma

• Reflect on experience in which you felt emotional stress as a result of hearing about someone’s painful experience and your effort to be supportive.
• It could be a victim, or family member or friend.
• Recall the emotions, thoughts that arose as listened and tried to be helpful.
• Consider both (a) your direct reactions to their experience AND (b) your internal response to be called upon to be a supporter and advocate.
Exercise: The Feelings that Accompany Vicarious Trauma

- Sadness
- Anger
- Outrage
- Anxiety
- Inadequacy
- Frustration
- Fear
- Guilt
- “Overwhelmed-ness”
- Others?
How We Respond to Vicarious Trauma is Critical

- We must recognize these symptoms are signs of our humanity. If did not response this way, we would probably not want to or be able to help.
- What is needed are ways to experience and process the strong emotions that arise naturally in our work. When done skillfully – we can avoid vicarious trauma turning into vicarious trauma stress syndrome.
Vicarious Traumatic Stress Disorder

• Decreased Energy
• Disconnect (from victims, co-workers)
• Numbing
• Hopelessness
• Cynicism
• Nightmares
• Changes in Appetite/Sleep
• Diminished interest in Pleasurable Activities/Exercise
Distinguish “Burn Out”

• “Burnout” is a more generalized syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of a sense of effectiveness or achievement at work. Symptoms of burnout can resemble vicarious traumatic stress disorder but burnout is more easily addressed by time off, reduction in work load, or an internal shift.
Risk Factors for Vicarious Traumatic Stress Syndrome

• Nature of the work
• Personal history of trauma
• Current life stresses (divorce, financial issues)
• Cumulative exposure
  • Especially if not acknowledged or addressed.
Preventing Vicarious Traumatic Stress Syndrome: Components of a Self-Care Program

• Maintaining Boundaries.
• Quality Supervision/Organizational Support.
• Self-Care:
  – Physical care (sleep, exercise, time in nature).
  – Psychological self care (family, community, confidents, hobbies).
  – Spiritual life which can include mindfulness practices.
Preventing Vicarious Traumatic Stress Syndrome: Self-Care Triad

• Self-care strategies can be thought of as a triad:
  • **Escape**: Getting away from it all, physically or mentally (books or films, taking time, playing video games, talking to friends about things other than work);
  • **Rest**: Having no goal or time-line, or doing things you find relaxing (lying on the grass watching the clouds, getting a massage);
  • **Play**: Engaging in activities that make you laugh or lighten your spirits (playing with a child, being creative, being physically active).
Mindfulness: Definition

• Mindfulness is described as a non-judgmental, meta-cognitive state in which a person becomes very aware of their thoughts, surrounding, and feelings and attempts to experience all stimuli without judgment and without relating the stimuli to the past or the future.

• Mindfulness builds the capacity to sustain moment-by-moment focused awareness of, and to, one’s internal experience and immediate environment.
Use of Mindfulness Practices for Direct Service Providers

• With Victims (requires training and supervision).
  – Mindfulness enables capacity for sustained presence and compassion and enhances qualities such as listening, warmth, equanimity, openness, and affect tolerance.

• With Yourself (as a “daily” practice or in the moment).
  – Mindfulness with clients is like “putting on your oxygen mask first” on a plane.
  – Mindfulness helps you “hold your space” when confronted with trauma. Mindfulness is like a container to holds the trauma but you do not fall into it.
Mindfulness: Staying Present with Victims

• The goal of service providers is to help. To help, you have to be present. Do not underestimate human desire to flee that which is scary and unpleasant.

• When we flee the present moment, we become “mindless.”
  – Mindlessness is a state of rigidity in which one adheres to a single perspective and acts automatically. When mindless, we are reactive, unaware of our own emotions, how we appear to others, because we are not aware how we are inside.

• When mindless, we cannot be fully present and helpful as witness, caretaker, supporter, and friend. Meditation Techniques for Being Present include concentration on the breathe, visual (candle), and mantra practices.
“Mindful” Compassion

• “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” Dalai Lama (2009).

• Caring about a victim makes a difference. But, faced with the pain of others, we can get overwhelmed or over-identify with the victim or result, or internally flee by distancing and shutting down emotionally. Mindfulness practices can help find a balance between these two extremes by building compassion.

• “Mindful Compassion” has been defined at “non-judgmental awareness and appreciation of the predicament and suffering of others (and oneself) with the felt desire to relieve suffering and increase well-being.”
Mindfulness Practice: Being Present with Difficult Situations by Saying “Yes”

• Noticing & Counting Breaths.
• Friendliness towards Distraction.
• Recall a Difficult Situation (perhaps same one as before).
  – Get in touch with charged essence of situation (scene, words, self-belief).
  – Locate in the body.
• Send a stream of “NO” to these feelings/beliefs.
• Explore your reaction to resistance to what is.
  ❑ Pause and breathe 3x
• Say “Yes” to this situation and feelings and belief.
• Repeat a stream of gentle “yes” and observe.
Mindfulness Practices: Evoking Compassion in Difficult Situations

- Reflect on your intention that victims have more peace in their lives.
- Bring one victim to mind – feel what they feel w/o getting caught up. Recognize that in life there is pain and suffering.
- Reflect that hurting after trauma is part of being alive & recovery.
- Remember that everything is impermanent, everything changes, even this person’s suffering will change, lessen, even depart.
- Your job is not to save this victim but to be present with compassion.
- Vow only to do the best you can do today.
- Experience gratitude for this opportunity to help.
- Because we are all connected.
- And every moment is precious, even this one.
More on Mindful Compassion

• Meditation helps compassion grow because it can reduce interference from personal history, cultural baggage, and egocentric need.
• Meditation promotes a recognition of “non-duality” – that we are all inextricably coexistent.
• Specific meditation practices to build compassion:
  – “Loving Kindness” meditation (send love and peace to self and widening circle).
  – “Tonglen” – Giving and Receiving (breathe in and breathe out pain of others).
Mindful Self-Debriefing

• After a troubling/upsetting meeting with a victim, take some time to do a mindful self-debriefing:
• What are some sad/upsetting things I learned about this victim’s life or circumstances?
• When I bring my mind to this victim and his/her life, I think:_____________________________.
• When I think about these things, I feel:_____________________________.
• As these feelings arise, I notice sensations in the following areas of my body: _______________________.

- **R** Recognize what is happening
- **A** Allow life to be just as it is
- **I** Investigate inner experience with kindness
- **N** Non-Identification.

RAIN directly de-conditions the habitual ways in which you resist your moment-to-moment experience. It doesn’t matter whether you resist “what is” by lashing out in anger, by having a cigarette, or by getting immersed in obsessive thinking. Your attempt to control the life within and around you actually cuts you off from your own heart and from this living world. RAIN begins to undo these unconscious patterns as soon as we take the first step.
RAIN: Recognize

• **Recognize what is happening.**
  - Recognition is seeing what is true in your inner life. It starts the minute you focus your attention on whatever thoughts, emotions, feelings or sensations are arising right here and now. Some parts of your experience are easier to connect with than others. You might recognize anxiety right away, but might not notice the actual sensations of tightness arising in the body. On the other hand, if your body is gripped by jittery nervousness, you might not recognize that this physical response is being triggered by your underlying belief that you are about to fail. You can awaken recognition simply by asking: “What is happening inside me right now?” Try to let go of any preconceived ideas.
RAIN: Allow Life to Be.

• **Allow Life to Be:**
  – Allowing means “letting be” the thoughts, emotions, feelings or sensations you discover. You may feel a natural sense of aversion, of wishing that unpleasant feelings would go away, but as you become more willing to be present with “what is,” a different quality of attention will emerge. Similar to the “YES” meditation.
  – It can be helpful to whispering an encouraging word or phrase like “yes” or “this too” or “I consent.” At first you might feel you’re just “putting up” with unpleasant emotions or sensations. Or you might say “yes” to shame and hope that it will magically disappear. In reality, we have to consent again and again. Offer the phrase gently and patiently, and in time your defenses will relax, and you may feel a physical sense of yielding or opening to waves of experience.
RAIN: Investigate with Kindness

• Investigation with Kindness:
  - Sometimes, the first two steps are enough to provide relief. In the thick of things, you may be easily overwhelmed by intense feelings and triggered over and over again. Here, you may need to strengthen mindful awareness and a more focused attention to your present experience. With investigation you engage in a more active and pointed kind of inquiry. You might ask yourself: “What most wants attention?” “How am I experiencing this in my body?” or “What am I believing?” or “What does this feeling want from me?” You might contact sensations of hollowness or shakiness, and then find a sense of unworthiness and shame buried in these feelings. Unless they are brought into consciousness, these beliefs and emotions will control your experience and perpetuate your identification with a limited, deficient self. To avoid causing more harm, you need to offer a gentle welcome to whatever surfaces as if a small child was asking you for help with a problem at school.
RAIN: Non-Identification

- Realize Non-identification; Rest in Natural Awareness.
  - The lucid, open and kind presence evoked in the R, A and I of RAIN leads to the N: the freedom of Non-identification, and the realization Natural awareness or natural presence. Non-identification means that your sense of who you are is not fused with or defined by any limited set of emotions, sensations or stories. When identification with the small self is loosened, we begin to intuit and live from the openness and love that express our natural awareness. The first three steps of RAIN require some intentional activity. In contrast, the N of RAIN expresses the result: a liberating realization of your natural awareness. There’s nothing to do for this last part of RAIN—realization arises spontaneously, on its own. We simply rest in natural awareness.
Another Minute of Mindfulness

• Rest in Awareness/Count Breathes

• *The past is nothing but memories,*
• *The future is nothing but plans,*
• *The only thing real is this moment.*