



MONASH University

Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

Researcher Trauma Workshop

Associate Professor Jan Coles
Professor Jill Astbury
Ms Elizabeth Dartnall
Ms Lizle Loots
Dr Shazneen Limjerwala



What is vicarious trauma (VT)?

- “the transformation of the therapist’s or helper’s (researcher’s) inner experience as a result of empathetic engagement with survivor clients (participants) and their trauma material” (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995)



Why are researchers at risk of VT?

- Doing research on sexual violence can result in vicarious trauma (VT).
- The empathy we feel as researchers, and the intimacy we experience with our research subject creates a permeable link between ourselves and the research subject, through which the trauma experienced can be transferred to the researcher.
- The negative change in our thoughts, perceptions and interpretations as a result of repeated engagement with traumatic research relate materials and experiences.

Who is at Risk?

- All of us – it is a normal response to doing research on traumatic issues
- Personal Factors that may increase risk:
 - Personal trauma history
 - Gender
 - Level of experience and influences within a workplace (workload; management)
 - Working with victims of sexual abuse
 - Personal coping styles
- It can be no less debilitating than the primary trauma

Who is at Risk 2

Organisations and researchers themselves often fail to recognise the potential impact – providing little or no support.

“The organisation I worked for offered no support systems and I had no external support systems in place.....at the time, I did not realise how vitally important it was to protect myself.

I became adept at burying the emotional stress, but of course, it continues to surface in a number of guises (SVRI Discussion Board)



A changed world view?



Nothing seems the same anymore!

- Worldview is a cognitive structure that helps us organise our experiences. It gives us a sense of competency and the confidence to function in everyday life
- Our worldview serves as lens through which we perceive reality
- Disruption of worldview is likely to happen when we are constantly exposed to traumatic materials (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).
- Worldview is a concept postulated by Janoff-Bulman (1992), Epstein (1991), Parkes (1975), and Bowlby (1969).

Impact of Vicarious Trauma

Challenges our understanding of the world in 5 key areas:

- Safety
- Trust /dependency
- Esteem
- Control
- Intimacy

Difficult to recognise. Symptoms include: anger, anxiety, depression, sadness, exhaustion, concentration problems, headaches, sleeplessness, increase in drug and alcohol use and social isolation.



Trauma and recovery

- What Judith Herman (1992) wrote about the abused child is also relevant to us:
- The child...is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness...(p. 96)



What can be done?

This is your challenge today!

Activity One - In pairs

Recall the story from one of your research participants that is still vivid in your mind

Tell your partner their story and how it challenged your worldview (beliefs, values etc)?

What were the most difficult questions it raised for you and how have you tried to answer them?



What can be done?

Activity Two (In groups 4-5)



- With researcher safety in mind, what steps could you and your organisation have taken to ensure your safety?
- As a group make a project plan (think of different perspectives: yourself, your managers and the organisation). Use the resources provided to help
- Map your plan on the paper provided
- Present your plan to the group

Your Solutions

