
THE ADVOCATE

▼ Secondary Victimization

▼ Stress & Burnout

THE ADVOCATE

Sexual assault advocates have a responsibility to place the needs of the survivor first. However, often times it is necessary to re-evaluate our own needs and feelings to ensure the survivor is provided with the most objective advocate as possible.

Secondary Victimization

Volunteers or professionals who work with victims in crisis over a period of time may experience stress themselves as a result of being exposed to so many stories and images of victimization. They are, in effect, experiencing trauma vicariously and can become secondary victims of the same events their clients have been exposed to.

The burden placed on advocates can be a very heavy one. They are asked to absorb the pain and suffering of their clients, to validate the survivor's experience, and to be empathetic and supportive without losing their objectivity. Advocates who work with survivors are exposed to graphic descriptions of brutal victimization's, which leave lasting impressions in the mind and heart. It is impossible to listen to these stories without taking in some of the pain and anguish expressed by the survivor. According to Karen W. Saakvitne, Ph.D. and Laurie Anne Pearlman, Ph.D., "The bottom line is that working with trauma survivors changes us profoundly. For therapists, or helpers, or analysts, or counselors, whose work involves empathic connection with individuals who have experienced traumatic, horrific life experiences, the impact of that work on the self of the helper is enormous." (Pearlman, L.A., Saakvitne, K.W., et al. (1995) Vicarious traumatization I: The cost of empathy. Ukiah, CA. Cavalcade Productions, Inc.)



The advocate may feel outraged, horrified, shocked, saddened or helpless. It can be very difficult to let go of those feelings at the end of the day, and return to work the following day, refreshed and renewed. Many times, advocates will "take the work home with them" and find themselves thinking about the images they have been exposed to, worrying about a survivor, or feeling depressed because ideal or even adequate resources are not available. This can place a strain on the advocate's coping skills as well as on his/her relationships with family and friends.

Those in a helping role should consider the possibility of secondary victimization if they notice persistent signs of anger, anxiety, depression or sadness, low self-esteem or emotional exhaustion. Advocates who are experiencing secondary victimization or vicarious trauma may find themselves unable to make decisions or having difficulty concentrating or remembering things. For some, the manifestations may be more somatic, such as fatigue, headaches, difficulty sleeping, or gastrointestinal symptoms.

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Many times, the helper feels guilty about being angry or frustrated and tries to address the guilt by giving even more, trying to be more empathic, more helpful and pouring his/her limited energy into the client rather than addressing his/her own needs. It may be difficult to tell when enough is enough. She may try to deal with these feelings by smoking, abusing alcohol or prescription drugs, or over-eating. Although these behaviors may momentarily relieve stress, over time, they only add to the physical and emotional stressors experienced by the advocate.

Others may address their own secondary victimization by withdrawing or shutting down emotionally, in an attempt to distance their own sense of self from the traumas experienced by their clients. "Victim service providers can, as a consequence of long-term stressful service, 'armor their hearts' and shift to a stance of what could be called 'professional warmth' in which they appear to be emotionally present with their client, but actually are not. Although such behavior may be completely unintentional, the result can be that providers in very insidious, hard-to-see, but ultimately injurious ways act to keep their clients from disclosing the real depth of their trauma because the provider cannot handle it anymore, or cannot tolerate that particular variety of it. This is doubly tragic in that it prevents service providers from establishing a genuine healing connection with victims, while at the same time, they personally will lose the enriching aspect of that connection, which for many providers was a fundamental motivation for entering the field of victim services" (Tobey, MD, Henry. National Victim Assistance Academy Training Text, Chpt. 6-2, Mental Health Needs) (Coleman, G., Gaboury, M., Murray, M. and Seymour, A., Ed, Office of Victims of Crime, Washington, D. C., 1999).

Often, the first line of defense is denial. The advocate may have difficulty acknowledging the toll that such work is taking, believing that to do so suggests that they are somehow failing. However, for persons who work with trauma survivors, the most important part of coping with the intensity of the work is to acknowledge **it will affect you**. It is important to recognize that "if you've been trained in crisis intervention and empathic, active listening skills, this work will affect you. If you really listen to what the client is telling you, this work will affect you. Recognizing that it is 'normal' to be affected by this type of work is the most important coping skill that you can give yourself." (Nelson, Terri Spahn. Vicarious trauma: Bearing witness to another's trauma. Proceedings from the 20th Annual Convening of Crisis Intervention, Chicago, 1996).

Another contributing factor in the development of vicarious trauma can be the system itself. According to the National Victim Assistance Academy, "Victim service providers are expected to provide comforting and compassionate support for crime victims while, at the same time, be outspoken advocates to ensure that victims are extended their rights within the justice system and receive necessary services. In addition, many crime victim assistance professionals work within the very system they are trying to change and improve; they know all too well its limitations. The responsibility of serving in roles that sometimes conflict can be a major source of stress. The nature of the work causes many crime victim advocates to be in regular contact with people who have suffered severe trauma and loss. The provision of effective victim assistance requires tremendous emotional energy and resilience, which can be a near-constant source of stress" (Coleman, G., Gaboury, M., Murray, M. and Seymour, A., Eds. Mental Health Needs: National Victim Assistance Academy Training Text, Ch. 6-2, Office of Victims of Crime, Washington, D. C., 1999).

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There are other stressors inherent in the work environment of victim service providers. Isolation, especially in communities in which they work for the only victim service agency, or where there is not a strong support network of victim service providers, may mean that there is not sufficient support to help the helpers cope with their own chronic stress. Funding pressures experienced by most victim service agencies can cause employees and volunteers to worry whether the program and/or adequate victim services will continue. Lack of closure can be a particularly frustrating issue. “Much of the work of victim service providers is fragmented: making a referral, helping a victim complete a compensation claim, or providing short-term crisis intervention. Very few victim service providers help and guide the victim through the entire criminal or juvenile justice process. The crisis counselor on call when the victim first contacts the agency may not be the same advocate as the one who provides court support. Thus, advocates must rely on allied professionals to provide a continuum of quality support and services. Consequently, opportunities for feedback on the ultimate outcome of a case are minimal” (Eisenberg, Ph.D. Terry, *Developing a law enforcement stress program for officers and their families*, National Institutes of Justice Report, NIJ, Washington, D.C., 1997).

According to Dr. Eisenberg, other stressors related to the work environment of many victim service agencies include frustration with the system, lack of adequate referral agencies, lack of career opportunities, inadequate rewards and extensive paperwork (Ibid.).

There are several things that advocates and other helping professionals can do to support themselves in the work environment. These include:

- avoiding over-identification with the job;
- meeting with other volunteers and staff to address issues of work overload;
- encouraging discussion of the impact of the work between experienced and inexperienced advocates and professionals in staff meetings;
- learning to set limits and say “no” when necessary;
- seeking out training opportunities to increase skills, career opportunities and support from others in the field.

On a personal level, advocates can reduce their susceptibility for secondary victimization by:

- striving for balance in life, between work and play, allowing for time to be social and alone, physical activities, hobbies and spiritual development;
- improving time management skills to avoid feeling overwhelmed and chronically pressured;
- monitoring attitudes and self-talk, recognizing and changing self-defeating thoughts;
- learning relaxation, meditation, or guided imagery that you can use during times of stress;
- exercising on a regular basis to release stress.

(Paraphrased from Eisenberg, Ph.D. Terry, *Developing a law enforcement stress program for officers and their families*, National Institutes of Justice Report, NIJ, Washington, D.C., 1997).

“Caregivers sometimes have a hard time knowing when they should be taken care of” (Lynne Hornyak, Ph.D. quoted in Edward, Randall. *APA Monitor*. I Washington, D.C., 1995). In other words, it is important to practice what we preach. According to Dr. K.W. Saakvitne, “If we don’t take care of ourselves, we can’t take of our clients (Saakvitne, K.W.,

Pearlman, L.A. and Staff of the Traumatic Stress Institute. Transforming the pain: a workbook on vicarious traumatization. New York, WW. Norton, 1996).

Stress and Burnout

Stress is a part of everyone's daily life and cannot be avoided. The simple act of crossing the street produces a degree of stress in most individuals. This stress is a positive type of stress. It is helpful stress which makes an individual alert enough so that she/he can avoid getting hit by a car. Besides making us more alert, positive stress helps to increase our energy level, helps to increase our level of creativity and in general helps make us more productive in our jobs.

At the same time, stress can be a negative factor in our lives. It can be debilitating to the point that we are ineffective and counter productive both at work and at home. Since it is virtually impossible to live without some stress in our lives it is important that as a sexual assault program advocate learn to recognize when stress is having a negative effect on you and do something about it.

Constantly working with survivors of trauma is extremely stressful and often results in burnout within several years. Professionals and volunteers in this field often find that the tragedies they are exposed to trigger memories and grief associated with losses and struggles in their own lives. It is, therefore, imperative that those who wish to work in this field focus on processing and recovering from all of their own traumatic experiences before exposing themselves to further traumatic material.

Advocates will be working with survivors in crisis. Advocates may find that they are being asked for help by someone who has just been sexually assaulted. The survivor may be suffering from severe anxiety and depression. They may have even contemplated suicide. The person will be looking for support and guidance and the pressure will be on you, the advocate, to help. Over a period of time the responsibility of helping one after another person in crisis can take its toll on the helper. The helper may find him or herself feeling over-stressed and as a result not being of much help to anyone.

One of the primary causes of traumatic stress is the feeling of powerlessness. This is true for the survivors we serve and it is also true for us. After working with survivors for some time, it is common to feel helpless to stop the violence, the suffering, or the intense pain that we witness. This feeling of powerlessness is linked to the traumatic reaction. There are several things you can do in order to avoid burnout and vicarious trauma. As stated previously, you must process the traumatic experiences and losses in your own life. You must make our own recovery a priority before you can safely offer stable support to others.

Look at the following two lists of physical and psychological symptoms. They will help you to examine your own stress level right now while in training. The lists can also be used later after you have worked as an advocate for a while to keep a check on your stress level.

If you regularly exhibit two of the following physical symptoms, it may be a sign that high stress is putting your body at high risk.

Physical and Behavioral Symptoms:

- Excess weight for age and height

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- Increase in drinking and/or smoking
- Premenstrual tension or missed cycles
- Desire to eat as soon as a problem arises
- Frequent heartburn
- Lack of appetite
- High blood pressure
- Alteration of sleep patterns
- Feeling of constant fatigue
- Chronic diarrhea or constipation
- Frequent headaches
- Shortness of breath
- Possibility of fainting or nausea
- Inability to cry or a tendency to burst into tears easily
- Persistent sexual problems
- Excessive nervous energy which prevents sitting still and relaxing
- Accident proneness
- Dryness of mouth and throat
- Pounding of the heart
- Excessive perspiration
- Trembling/nervous tics
- Impulsive behavior
- Grinding teeth
- Speech difficulties
- Muscle spasms

If you regularly experience any 4 of the following psychological symptoms (or a total of any four physical and psychological symptoms), then you may be suffering from excessive stress.

Psychological Symptoms:

- Constant feeling of uneasiness
- Constant irritability with family and work associates
- Boredom with life
- Recurring feelings of being unable to cope with life
- Anxiety about money
- Morbid fear of disease, especially cancer and heart disease
- Fear of death, yours and others
- Sense of suppressed anger
- Inability to have a good laugh
- Dread as weekend approaches
- Reluctance to take vacation
- Inability to concentrate for any length of time or to finish one job before beginning another one

Once you have discovered that your level of stress is too high, the first step is to assess the origins of your stress. For example, is it truly your work with sexual assault survivors or is it

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a combination of your work and your own personal problems that are creating too much stress?

If the stress does stem from working with sexual assault survivors you must be clear about what your role is and what it is not. You cannot fix or change the terrible reality with which your client is faced. You are there to offer nonjudgmental support. You are there to educate about the effects of trauma and assist the survivor in developing a plan for coping. You are there to provide information that will aid the victim in working with the system and in accessing support services. It is important that you remain clear about your purpose.

Once you have decided what it is that is causing you to have too much stress, then develop a plan for reducing your stress level. You may need, for example, to take some time off from being an advocate so that you can expend all your energies at resolving your personal problems.

If you have assessed your stress and carried out a plan to reduce this stress and you are still not feeling better, then you need to reassess and see if something else is causing you stress. You may want to talk with your director and see if he or she may be able to give you useful feedback. Seeking the help of a mental health professional is also an option which may need to be explored.

Part of your responsibility now that you are becoming an advocate is to keep yourself psychologically and physically healthy so that you can best serve the survivors that seek your help. Besides being aware of your own stress level, take steps to actively combat stress. Exercise regularly. Choose a type of exercise that you enjoy and do it regularly. Research has shown that people who exercise regularly stand less chance of getting heart disease. Regular exercise acts as diversion to get your mind off stressful events. It also conditions your body to enable you to handle higher levels of stress.

Also allow yourself time to simply relax and get away from it all. Choose an activity that you enjoy doing that will help take your mind off of things. Meditation following exercise is a great practice in reducing stress. Watching T.V., playing cards, or simply reading may be important activities which will help revitalize and reenergize you and make you much more effective as an advocate.

You may not feel sympathetic to every survivor. You may not even like some survivors. Conversely, you may feel intense sadness and grieve for a survivor. We must not judge ourselves harshly for these reactions. Feelings are not always rational or within our control. We are, however, completely responsible for our behavior. We cannot become fixated on what we do and do not feel. We must focus our attention purposefully and direct our energy toward behaving in a compassionate and professional manner with every victim regardless of your feelings. Just as you do not attach judgment to clients, you must not attach judgment to the feelings that you, yourself, may experience.

Finally, you must make your own mental health a priority. You must know your limits, communicate about what you are feeling and learning as we experience these new situations, allow time for peace and relaxation, nurture intimate relationship with those who are important to you, seek opportunities to enjoy the things that lift your spirits and inspire you. You cannot give to others when you are empty.