

# Transforming Vicarious Trauma



Michelle A. Kenefick, LCSW, SEP

Traumatic Stress Institute / Klingberg Family Centers

Sound Counseling Center, LLC

# Our agenda

- Frame of training
- Definitions (Trauma / VT)
- Risk factors
- Signs & symptoms
- Transforming VT
- Self Care in ACTION





- Share with us your name
- Something about yourself
- Something you would like to get from today's training





# Now tell me who you really are...

- Introduce yourselves
  - Only this time...  
do it while avoiding:
    - Your job title
    - Your place of employment – including the town
    - Your education or work experience
- Instead: try talking about you, your interests, hobbies, the last book you read, movie you saw, your family, your greatest achievement OUTSIDE of work or school



# ~ Trauma ~

## Types of events

- Acute traumatic event - Occur at a particular time and place / short-lived
- Chronic traumatic situations - Occur repeatedly over long periods of time
- Result in the experience of
  - Terror
  - Horror
  - Decreased sense of safety
  - Intense feelings of fear
  - Loss of trust in others
  - Guilt
  - Shame





# Trauma Defined

- Trauma originates as a response in the nervous system. It does not originate as an event. Trauma is in the nervous system, not in the event (Levine)
- Trauma is the unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions in which:
  - The individual's ability to integrate his or her emotional experience is overwhelmed; and
  - The individual experiences a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity (Pearlman, Saakvitne, et al)

# How do you notice stress on the job?

- Physically
- Emotionally





# Signs of Healthy Stress

- Good concentration
- Clear and confident decision making
- Clear thinking
- Strong interest in the work we do
- Good attendance and time keeping
- Enhanced achievements
- Good long-term planning
- Deadlines met

- High standard of work
- Good information flow
- High level of motivation
- Realistic about self
- Plenty of energy
- Cheerful manner
- Positive comments
- Concern and care for others
- Constructive criticism given and received
- Recognizes when needs help
- Appropriate use of humor



# Signs of Unhealthy Stress

- Lack of concentration
- Constantly taking work home
- Memory loss
- Poor decision making
- Inconsistency
- Poor work quality
- Not meeting targets or deadlines
- Irregular attendance and time keeping
- Accidents
- Poor long term planning



- Client complaints
- Bad mistakes
- Ineffective problem solving
- Lower standards accepted
- Regularly working late
- Unreasonable complaints
- Tiredness
- Depression
- Emotional outbursts
- Unpredictability
- Frequent criticism, gossip or back-biting
- Low self-esteem





- Overly self-critical
- Easily disgruntled
- Extreme mood swings
- Only concern shown is for self
- Eating difficulties
- Greater use of alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, drugs
- Difficulties with sleep
- Confusion
- Low interest in work
- No one wants to work with you
- Physical illness



# Vicarious Trauma

- Most simply put, VT can be thought of as the negative changes that happen over time as you witness and engage with other people's suffering and need.
- The term vicarious trauma (Perlman & Saakvitne, 1995), describes the phenomenon generally associated with the "cost of caring" for others (Figley, 1982).
- Burnout (vs. VT) is usually the result of prolonged stress or frustration, resulting in exhaustion of physical strength, emotional strength and/or motivation (Maslach, 2003). Burnout tends to be associated with the workplace, and is often a predictable outcome when the work environment demands a great deal from workers. One of the characteristics of burnout is that it occurs over a fairly long period of time and is cumulative. It does not afflict a person after one bad day.

# Vicarious Trauma

- It is the emotional residue of exposure that counselors have from working with people as they are hearing their trauma stories and become witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured.
- It is a permanent change in the provider resulting from **empathic engagement** with a person's traumatic background (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).
- Although there are parallels to burnout, VT is more pervasive, impacting all facets of life, including the body, mind, character and belief systems.

# Vicarious Trauma

- **The relationship of the person suffering from vicarious trauma to the world around them becomes altered.** Like burnout, vicarious trauma typically develops over a period of time, after many sessions of listening to painful experiences.
- VT is a state of tension and preoccupation of the stories/trauma experiences described by clients. This tension and preoccupation might be experienced by counselors in several ways.



# Vicarious Trauma

- A process that unfolds over time – not a response to one person, one story or one situation
- Occurs as the result of your capacity for empathy – because you care about people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them ; because you feel committed or responsible to help and at times, are unable to fulfill that commitment
- Over time leads to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being

# Vicarious Trauma

- Not only impacts you but impacts your family, your organization, and the people you are working to help
- A key component includes changes in spirituality, which deeply impacts the way you see the world and your deepest sense of meaning and hope
- It is the cumulative effect of contact with survivors of violence, disaster or people who are struggling

# TED Talk

## Drowning In Empathy

Amy Cunningham



“Trauma always creates a ripple effect, the same as when someone throws a stone into a still pond.”



# Enjoy your 15 minute break!



# Risk Factors



- Those who have experienced trauma themselves
- Other stressors happening in your life
- Lack of good social support
- High exposure to traumatic material
- Lack of connection with a source of meaning, purpose & hope
- Unsustainable work / life boundaries / unrealistic ideals & expectations about work

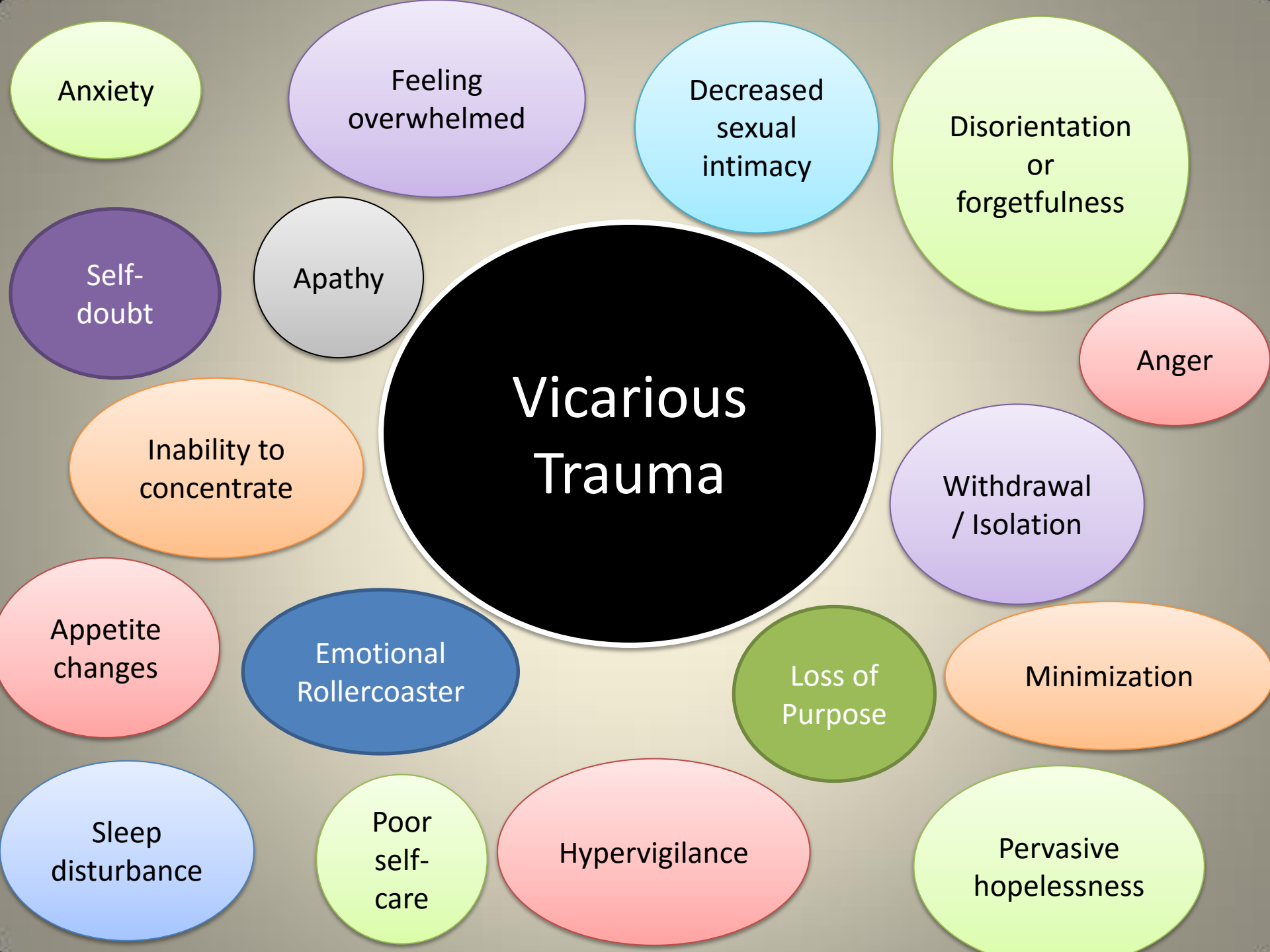
# Risk factors

- Personality structures that tend to avoid problems or difficult feelings, blame others for their difficulties, or withdraw from others when things get hard
- Organizations that don't foster an organizational culture of effective management, open communication, and good staff care, increase their staffs' risk
- The perception that our work requires us to tough it out, take personal safety risks, and "handle it"



**TAKING RISK**

There's a fine line between taking a calculated risk and doing something dumb.





# Signs and Symptoms of VT

- Somatic / physical
- Psychological / emotional
- Social / recreational
- Spiritual
- Professional



# Warning Signs of Trauma Exposure

- Feeling helpless and hopeless
- The sense that we can never do enough
- Hyper-vigilance
- Diminished creativity
- Inability to embrace complexity
- Minimizing
- Chronic exhaustion / physical ailments
- Inability to listen / deliberate avoidance
- Dissociative moments
- Sense of persecution
- Guilt
- Fear
- Anger and cynicism
- Inability to empathize / numbing
- Addictions
- Grandiosity: an inflated sense of importance related to one's work



- Signs at work
  - Avoidance of exposure to new or old traumatic material
  - Intense desire to help certain clients
  - Perception of survivors as fragile and needing a protector (savior / rescuer)
  - Polarized view of others as victims or perpetrators
  - Thoughts and feelings of inadequacy as a professional
  - Loss of hope or sense of dread when working with certain clients
  - Dissatisfaction with work
- Signs outside of work
  - Client issues encroaching upon personal time
  - Inability to let go of work related matters
  - Loss of enjoyment in activities, cessation of self-care activities
  - Loss of energy

# Exercise

## Signs and Symptoms

# Video

An up close and personal perspective on VT





**“Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can’t help them, at least don’t hurt them.”**

**~ Dalai Lama**



# Exercise

- List 2 reasons you entered this line of work
- List 2 ways in which the work is different from what you expected coming into the field
- List 2 things about the work that are most challenging for you
- Write briefly about 1 success story you've witnessed or encountered

# Professionals Don't Cry

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.

Rachel Naomi Remen



# ~ Exercise ~

Write down 3 ways that your work has negatively impacted you

List 3 ways that you have been positively impacted by your work





Transformation occurs only when we remember,  
breath by breath...

To move toward our emotional distress

Without condemning or justifying our experience

~ Pema Chodron

# It's about the how...

- How you bounce back
- How you endure in the face of challenge
- How you learn from
- And make meaning of...



# Using a Resilience Framework

- Describe a stressful experience you recently had at work
- Identify the resilient behaviors used following the experience
- List the non-resilient behaviors used following the event
- How could things have gone differently using resilient behaviors?
- What self-care behaviors could have mitigated the negative impact of this experience?

# It is possible!



# Self-Care in Action





# Compassion Practice





# Some other ideas & suggestions...

- Designate a day of rest
- Start an acknowledgment process at work
- Be with nature





# More ideas

- Share moments of beauty and gratitude with those around you
- Be a detective and identify the clues you see in life that offer beauty and opportunities for gratitude
- Create a gratitude journal





# More ideas...

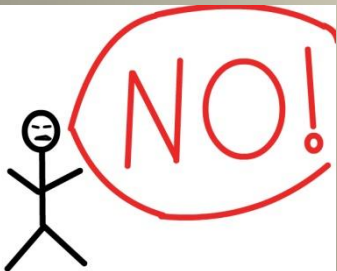
- Sing, dance, laugh, listen and play music
- Touch and be touched
- Find new hobbies
- Practice introducing yourself without identifying your job / career



# More ideas...



- Build “downtime” into your day
- Build a “work free zone” in your home
- Learn to say no
- Reduce your caseload



# More ideas...

- Re-evaluate your expectations of yourself
- Take time to plan so that your time is used in the most efficient manner
- Take a vacation



# And more ideas...

- Unplug
- Take a screen-free vacation





# Take Five

5 minute daily self-awareness breaks

- Stop and pay attention!!!
- Observe / feel what's going inside and outside of you
- Choose a new way of being and doing now

During these 5 minute breaks – make believe that you are in a bubble and only notice what is happening to you and around you. Be aware of your feelings, thoughts and behaviors.

These little shifts in self-awareness can transform the quality of our lives!



# Self Care Calendars



# YOUR Self-Care Plan in ACTION

- Physical
- Emotional
- Professional
- Spiritual
- Social
- Financial

Remember – it is always  
a work in progress!!!

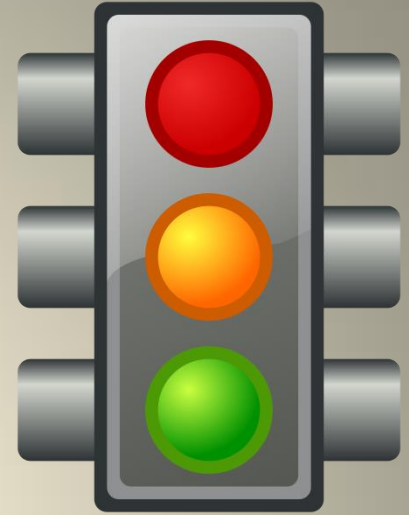


# Self-Care Wheel

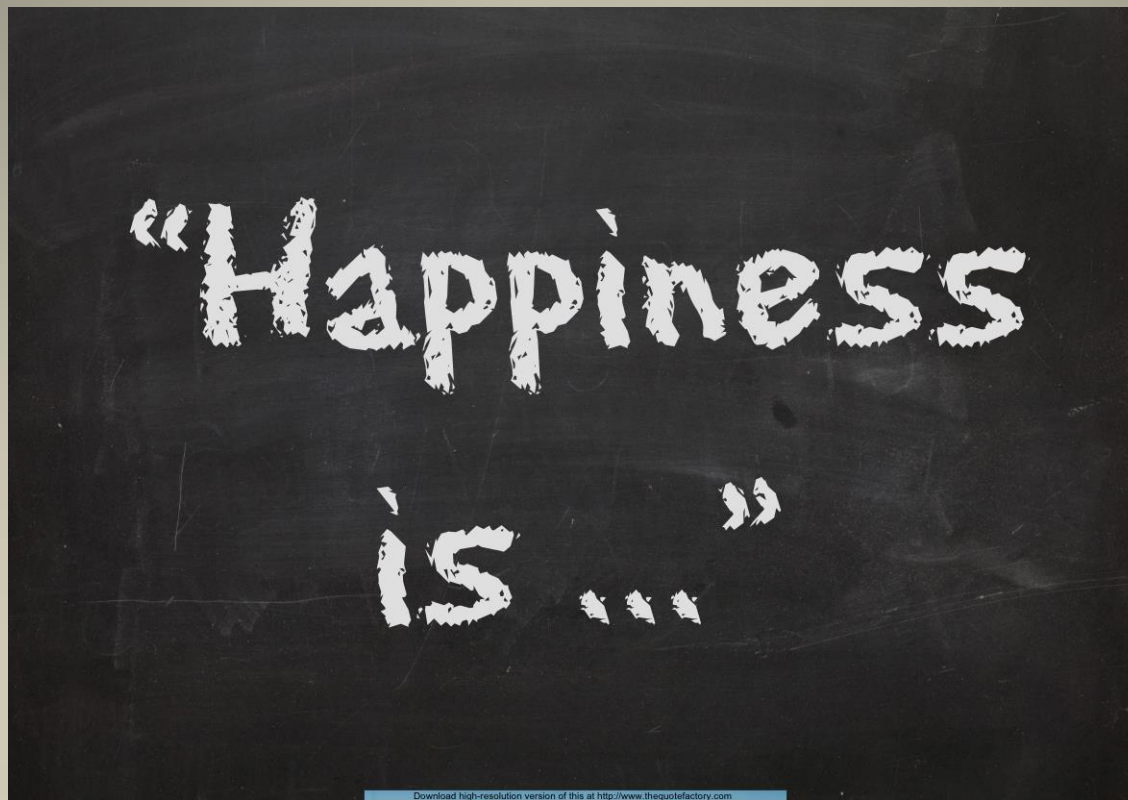
# Exercise

My Maintenance Self-Care Plan Worksheet

# Create a graduated plan...



- What will you do when you're on green?
- What will you do when you're on yellow?
- What will you do when you're on red?



What does happiness mean to you?



Do  
something  
impossible!



- Identify one thing that you would love to incorporate into your workday but are certain you could not. What could you do to make that aspiration a reality?
- Write down all your sick leave, vacation time and mental health days. Plan the year ahead.

# Organizational Ideas

- Supervision for ALL staff
- Want to create / maintain a culture where it is expected / is the norm to talk about CT and VT
- Establish what supervision SHOULD look like –
  - Is challenging!!!
    - Hard to balance administrative task-oriented supervision and be supportive especially due to time constraints
    - Can be challenging when you are supporting someone in supervision around VT and holding them accountable

# More ideas...

- Hold space for grief
- Remember that VT happens because of the way we empathically engage
- If we didn't invest our hearts, we likely wouldn't develop VT or at least, not to the same degree but the cost would be that we wouldn't be as effective in what we do...

# More ideas...

- Foster culture where there's permission to discuss VT
- Embed attention to VT in the workings of organization like regular retreats or forums
- Offer health benefits that include mental health coverage.
- Use staffing patterns that allow back-up and sharing of responsibility and coverage
- Set reasonable caseload expectations
- Work with staff to identify and address signs of VT

# The Solution!!!

- There is a parallel process between how trauma affects the people we work with and ourselves
- The same thing helps us that helps the people we work with...

Connection

# The Equus Effect



# Letter to yourself

- List 3 activities or things you can commit to now or in the next 30 – 90 days to improve your ability to prioritize self-care

# Final reflection...



- Take some time to consider what you've learned in this session
- What thought or idea can you take with you that will be helpful?
- What are the some things you've learned about yourself?
- Has your thinking changed about what is possible for you?
- Any other statements of learning, appreciation or challenges...

# Evaluations

Please be reflective and honest.

Your feedback is invaluable in ensuring that future workshops include your insights and are relevant to participant needs.

Anything is possible

