TOOLS TO REDUCE VICARIOUS TRAUMA, SECONDARY TRAUMA & COMPASSION FATIGUE

A FREQUENT QUESTION SEEMS TO BE: "WHAT CAN I DO PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY TO REDUCE THE NEGATIVE STRESS-RELATED EFFECTS OF MY WORK?"

Where to start?

For starters, it is important to identify the main challenges that you are facing: Is it related to too much exposure to difficult stories or a lack of referral resources? Is it work overload or an unsupportive supervisor/toxic team? Are you struggling with difficult personal circumstance that are affecting your ability to manage your stress? Do you feel overwhelmed with your complex case load and feel that you lack training in managing the most difficult and challenging situations? The answers will likely be as varied as there are professions and individuals reading these lines. So where can we start?

To be honest, it can be disappointing when people who come to us at TEND expecting sound bites and "quick fixes" to these complex issues because the solutions are complicated, just like the work that we do is multi-faceted and challenging. **But here are some places to start**:

Recent research in the field of STS and Compassion fatigue suggests that there are particular vulnerability factors that can increase your likelihood of being negatively impacted by the work.
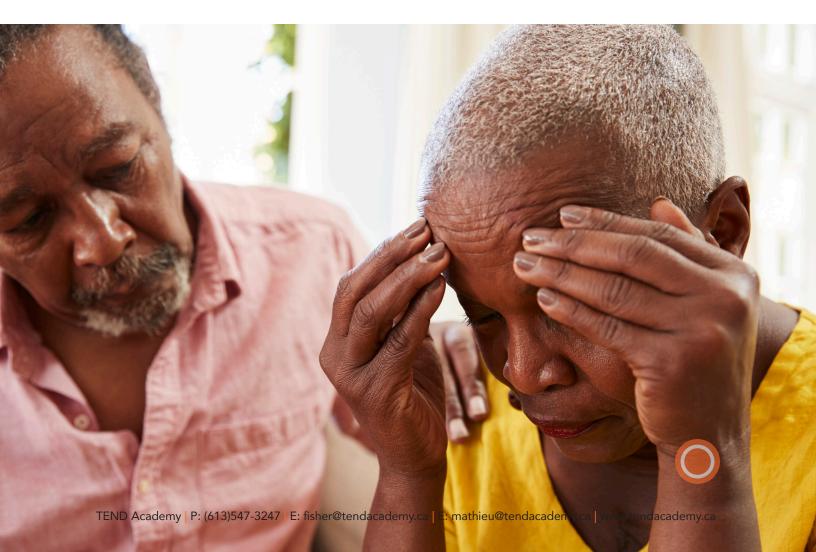
WHICH OF THESE FACTORS ARE TRUE FOR YOU?

Personal vulnerability factors

Do you have your own history of trauma? Are you currently struggling with a difficult family/personal circumstance? Do you work with a population that shares some of your own personal experiences of oppression and/or discrimination? Do you have a history of mental illness or addiction that is currently re-emerging? All of these factors can contribute to increased vulnerability when doing high-stress, trauma-exposed work.

Traumatic grief/loss in the workplace

Have you experienced losses at work? The death(s) of clients or patients, someone that you worked with who disappeared and never returned, providing you with no closure? A beloved colleague who died unexpectedly or retired or was laid off? The loss of a well-respected supportive supervisor or mentor? Significant changes to your workplace?

Direct exposure

Are you exposed to dangerous situations in your work? Have you ever been threatened, assaulted physically or verbally on the job? Is your work high-risk?

Secondary/Vicarious Trauma

Are you regularly exposed to indirect trauma at work? Hearing/viewing difficult case files, traumatic images and stories?

Compassion Fatigue

Have you experienced a shift in your ability to feel empathy for individuals you work with and/or colleagues or loved ones? Some situations can be very depleting – chronically desperate clients who don't follow through on your recommendations and keep coming back in distress, a very large homogenous case load where all of the stories start sounding the same, years of exposure to traumatic stories that no longer generate any reaction in you.

Systems Failure

Many professionals describe experiencing moral distress around failures of the system: rules, laws and policies that you disagree with but are still mandated to comply with and that you feel are causing further harm, lack of referral resources and other injustices. All of these can lead to a pervasive feeling of anger and contribute to burnout and workplace toxicity and a decrease in the quality of care provided.

Burnout

Burnout can result from a negative overall workplace experience: your hours, your salary, your workload, the health of your work climate, rewards and recognition, who you immediately report to, the quality of your work relationships with colleagues and a perception of fairness and adequate support to do your job in the best way possible. A negative combination of these factors can lead to burnout.

tend

What works?

First, take a look at which elements are most salient for you and begin by addressing those that feel most manageable. As the saying goes "Dig where the ground is soft". Seek support, formally with a good mental health practitioner or a coach, informally with colleagues and friends. Look at ways to reduce trauma exposure in your personal/leisure time. Learn some stress-reduction techniques. Get more training in trauma-informed practices which can be highly protective in retaining compassion when working with difficult cases.

Be open to the possibility of changing jobs if things are just too challenging where you are now. As Cheryl Richardson says in her book "Take time for your life" (1999) "Do not confuse difficult choices with no choice." There is too much at stake to ignore compassion fatigue and secondary trauma.

For more information and resources go to www.tendacademy.ca