

Maintaining Good Mental Health during Challenging Times

To say these are challenging times is an understatement. We are in the midst of a global pandemic. Many have witnessed videos of police brutality followed by civil unrest. Unemployment is the highest it has been since the great depression. And, in some ways, people seem more divided than ever.

In challenging times, we often focus on the needs of others, but it is imperative that we practice self-care. We can only help others if we continue to calm and refuel ourselves.

Whether you are an essential worker during the pandemic, advocating for change, or even just watching the news and social media these days, you are at risk of suffering from vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma comes from witnessing suffering or from helping someone else process their suffering. Human beings are empathetic creatures. We often cry when we witness other people cry. We may actually feel pain or nausea when we see someone else injured or sick. When someone tells us about their frightening or painful experience, we not only visualize it and hear their words, we tend to have empathy for the feelings the person describes experiencing. Traditionally we have diagnosed vicarious trauma in therapists, nurses, first responders, and others who see and hear about trauma repeatedly. The same symptoms and diagnosis can happen during a time of unrest when many people are witnessing trauma daily. The good news is we have ways we can heal and protect ourselves.

I. Know the Risk Factors

- A.) History of Trauma- If you have been a victim of abuse or trauma at anytime in your life, you are at high risk of experiencing vicarious trauma. Many people who have experienced domestic violence, child abuse, military action, violent crime, or other trauma share that following witnessing someone else's trauma, they experienced nightmares, flash backs, and other symptoms of stress.
 - B.) Job that Requires You to Witness or Hear about Trauma
 - C.) Watch a great deal of news
 - D.) Direct Care Provider- This could be a professional role or a role you have within your family or friend group. If others are dependent upon your physical and/or emotional care for their well-being, you may be at higher risk for vicarious trauma
 - E.) Spend a great deal of time on social media
- II. **Stay grounded-** In order to act as a first responder, a crisis therapist, a protestor, at times a parent, and any other emergency role; you have to release hormones that increase your adrenaline and help you act quickly and with energy and alertness. If you sustain that for too long without a break, it will negatively impact your overall health. So, when the opportunity comes to calm down, help yourself become grounded

- A.) Take deep, slow, diaphragmatic breaths.
 - B.) Find something stable such as a wall that you can lean into or the ground you can feel solid beneath you.
 - C.) If someone you trust is near, you can synchronize your breathing or touch hands together. If alone, press your own hands together, feel your heart beat and your breath go in and out. Run your tongue over your teeth. Stretch.
 - D.) Notice your senses. What do you hear? See? Smell?
- III. Once you are Grounded, you can decide how to **Relax & Refuel**. Sometimes grounding is a brief time between clients or activities and sometimes it is a way to unwind so that you do not carry the day's stress with you into your self-care time.
- A.) If returning to a high stress event, what do you need before the return? Make your needs a priority.
 1. Water
 2. Food
 3. Rest
 4. A listening ear
 5. Some time to be creative
 6. Exercise
 7. Medical attention
 - B.) If grounding yourself at the end of your shift or activity, what do you want to do with your down time? Make your desires a priority.
 1. Designate alone time or social time, whatever refuels you
 2. Do something unrelated to your work or cause, just because you enjoy it
 3. Get plenty of sleep
 4. Exercise
 5. Eat healthy foods and drink plenty of water

IV. Debrief and Process Trauma

- A.) After a traumatic incident or stressful shift or activity, process the experience.
 1. You can do this creatively by drawing, working with clay, writing or even through dance or exercise.
 2. You can process the experience by making a time line of the events that unfolded and how you felt.
 3. You can tell another person about the experience. If your work includes a need for confidentiality, make sure you have a coworker or professional with whom you can debrief.
 4. If several people experience this together, it can be helpful to debrief together by reviewing what happened, feelings involved, and reviewing both what was positive and what you would do differently if it happened again.
- B.) Managers and supervisors and leaders of advocacy events or protests should take the responsibility to provide debriefing and processing experiences for personnel or participants.

- C.) If you frequently serve in a role that puts you at risk for vicarious trauma, have a plan for how to maintain your mental health as well as a plan for urgent situations when you have been overwhelmed or triggered. This may include seeing a therapist, having reflective supervision with a supervisor, or attending a support group.

V. Limit News and Social Media

- A.) A traumatic event watched several times can feel like several traumatic events.
- B.) Watching repeated footage can skew your perception of events.
 - 1. You may de-sensitize
 - 2. You may catastrophize
 - 3. Neither of the above is healthy long term
- C.) Staying informed can happen by choosing a few select, reputable, fact-based news sources and checking in but not more than once or twice a day.
- D.) Leaving 24 hour news on can skew your perception and heighten your stress and even lead to vicarious trauma.
- E.) When you do read or watch news, double check for accuracy and avoid sensationalism that can cause you to release stress hormones and experience ongoing high stress levels.
- F.) Avoid watching the news when children are present to protect them from experiencing vicarious trauma.

VI. Focus on What You Can Do

- A.) When a situation is upsetting to you, it is important to identify and talk about your feelings. The next step is to focus on what you can do.
- B.) Some of your goals maybe long term. Break them down into smaller goals. Experiencing even small success and productivity will be motivating and lift your mood.
 - 1. For example, your goal might be to create a more supportive work environment within your division. You want to learn and implement reflective supervision. A more immediate goal might be to make a list of self-care activities and ideas and post that in the break-room
 - 2. For example, you want to be a part of improving your community and reducing disparity. There could be several large goals there. Today, you might choose to participate in some kind of action or read a recommended book.
 - 3. It is important to note and celebrate small achievements on your way to reaching larger goals. This helps maintain hope and focus.

VII. Be Flexible and Patient

- A.) Be open to feedback from others and ready to make adjustments
- B.) Remember the best outcomes often involve several adjustments and even setbacks along the way
- C.) Stay in tune with your energy and be accommodating. If you need a break, take a break. Pace yourself.