



Support Guide

For staff working with potentially disturbing material and records

Support Guide One

The following guide notes are designed to help prepare for working with potentially disturbing records or content. This guide will:

1. Define the terms secondary trauma and compassion fatigue.
2. Give guidance on how to be better prepared to manage work which can be potentially traumatic.
3. Include simple principles and techniques which can help develop better coping mechanisms and resilience for this type of work.

Introduction

'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' (Remen, 1996).

Anyone who deals with disturbing material cannot help but be touched by what they see and read as suggested by the quote above.

Preparing to handle difficult material is an important first step to managing conditions around compassion fatigue and secondary trauma. Being prepared and acknowledging that we can be affected by the work is a first and vital step in developing resilience and coping strategies.

Defining the terms compassion fatigue and secondary trauma

Both terms are often interchangeable but some common definitions of these terms can include:

Secondary traumatic stress - Defined as indirect exposure to trauma through a firsthand account or narrative of a traumatic event. The vivid recounting of trauma by the survivor and other's subsequent cognitive or emotional representation of that event may result in a set of symptoms and reactions that parallel Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) .

Compassion fatigue - A state of tension and preoccupation with individual or cumulative trauma of clients as manifested in one or more ways the traumatic event and avoidance/numbing.

Burnout - A state associated with chronic stress and pressures in your vocation.

Understanding how these conditions may occur

It is important to realise that these conditions can affect anyone and that we are too quick to judge ourselves as weak or in some way wrong to have been touched in the way these conditions manifest themselves. An important first step in combating these conditions is to draw on an important rule from the practice of mindfulness.

That is:

Observation not Judgement. In other words we observe the effect things have on us and try to suspend judgement of those things and the affect they are having. This is a key principle we will visit again in later sections.

Some key reasons we may fall prey to compassion fatigue and secondary trauma are:

‘The Messiah Complex - I will ‘fix’ the problem and make everything OK. I can save the World’.

‘The Lone Ranger Complex - I know what I’m getting into, and I can handle it on my own.’

‘The Saint Complex - My faith and belief will carry my through, I can deal with the stress of working with suffering people.’

Preparing to work with disturbing material

Acknowledging that work may be difficult and may cause difficulties is important. If we are prepared then we already have our first line of defence.

It is important to notice the terms and language used in the paragraph above. Specifically, that the work may cause difficulties rather than it will. What we say and how we say things to ourselves has a significant impact on how we manage and develop resilience to issues we encounter.

Managing our internal dialogue

We all talk to ourselves. It is the way we formulate our thoughts. The key developer of behaviourism, B. F. Skinner called them our ‘private events’ and this dialogue has a significant impact on how we deal with the outside world.

Our internal dialogue when stressed or pressured can often be negative and quite confrontational. Also if we start to think and talk in a negative and toxic way we begin to filter everything in a negative and toxic way. The quality of our internal dialogue is important when preparing ourselves for stressful and potentially traumatic work.

Developing the right internal dialogue

- Take time to notice the tone of your voice inside your head.
- Notice the language of absolute and global terms.
- Find ways to say things to yourself in a friendlier and calmer way.
- Consider how you would talk to a friend who was having difficulties.
- Develop the art of suggestion over demand, of interest and possibilities over absolute certainties, so how things could be, rather than how they absolutely are
- A state of curiosity is often what we call a neutral state of mind; you are neither too negative nor too positive. A neutral state of mind can considerably help manage difficult work situations.



Changing our internal dialogue is another way of developing a better state. We often give ourselves a hard time when we are stressed and reinforce our negative state through a harsh tone and negative internal dialogue. Learning to develop a softer tone and changing the words we use can quickly and effectively change our internal state.

When it comes to words, especially what can be termed ‘hot emotional words’, we should consider terms on a sliding scale. Try to tone down the words we use. Look at the list overleaf and read each line from left to right and notice the affect the words have. Do you notice things seem different when you use the words on the far right rather than the far left?

How we feel or think about things

The power of internal dialogue – developing the friendly coach

Read the following set of words on the left running down the page starting with the first word say it in your head SIX times, then continue with the next wording saying that SIX times in your head. Repeat until you have gone through all the words.

⇒	⇒	⇒	⇒
RIDICULOUS	STUPID	SILLY	NOT IDEAL
BLIND RAGE	ANGRY	ANNOYED	A BIT FRUSTRATED
LUNATIC	IDIOT	FOOL	SLIGHTLY DAFT
NEVER	MAYBE	PERHAPS	POSSIBLY
TOTAL PANIC	FRIGHTENED	ANXIOUS	UNSETTLED

This is not meant to minimise how we feel or think of things, especially very traumatic or painful events, but it helps us to begin to manage such events more effectively. What we say to ourselves we move on to believe as fact.

Awareness and Acknowledgement

Preparation is all about being aware of the possibility of issues cropping up and being able to acknowledge when they do. In our later guide we will look at the warning signs and ways to manage issues should they occur.

There are however helpful ways to manage our stress levels and build resilience to more effectively tackle future difficulties. Short exercises which can help us to take time out have been shown to greatly improve our overall resilience to stress, compassion fatigue and burnout.

Developed around the key principles of Mindfulness they can help us take stock and keep us grounded ensuring we do not get swamped by negativity and stress. Many people will argue that they just do not have time for such exercises in their working day. But can you spare a minute?

A key developer of Mindfulness in Western clinical practice, Jon Kabat Zinn, once said:

‘For those seeking balance in their lives, a certain flexibility of approach is not only helpful, it is essential. Mindfulness practice has little to do with clock time. A few minutes of formal practice can be as profound as, or more so, than forty five minutes.’

Click here to download a couple of short exercises which take a minute to practice. If done regularly they can help manage stress and pressure in your work

by taking the pressure off for a short time and giving ‘breathing space’.

PDF - The Sixty Second Reality Check

PDF - Detached Mindfulness exercise

Some final thoughts...

If you don't take care of yourself, physically, mentally and spiritually, then eventually there will not be enough of you left to care for anyone else. In order to do the job effectively you need ‘spare capacity’.

Compassion fatigue / secondary trauma is always a possibility for any member of staff.

Compassion fatigue / secondary trauma is not a character flaw or a weakness.

Working with distressing material may be intermittent, but for some roles it will be a long term activity. Checking in with this guide and exercises over time will be important to build resilience.