

CARING FOR THE CAREGIVERS: ADDRESSING VICARIOUS TRAUMA IN HELPING PROFESSIONS

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Mirror Neurons

Mirror neurons are a type of neuron that were first discovered in the 1990s by a group of scientists at the University of Parma in Italy. Mirror neurons are found in the brains of primates, including humans, and they are believed to play a role in our ability to understand and imitate the actions of others.

Mirror neurons are found in areas of the brain involved in motor planning and execution, such as the premotor cortex and the inferior parietal lobule. They are activated when we perform an action ourselves and when we observe someone else performing the same action. This mirroring response is believed to enable us to understand the intentions and goals of others and to simulate their actions internally, which may contribute to our ability to imitate and learn from others.

Some researchers believe that mirror neurons are essential for social cognition, empathy, and the understanding of others' mental states while others propose more nuanced roles for these neurons. However, the precise functions and mechanisms of mirror neurons are still an active area of scientific investigation, and there is ongoing research to better understand their role in human behavior and cognition.



These three terms are complementary and yet different from one another that care givers experience that we want to address.



Compassion Fatigue (Figley, 1982) refers to the profound emotional and physical erosion that takes place when helpers are unable to refuel and regenerate

Vicarious Trauma was coined by Perlman & Saakvitne (1995) to describe the profound shift in world view that occurs in helping professionals when they work with clients who have experienced trauma: helpers notice that their fundamental beliefs about the world are altered and possibly damaged by being repeatedly exposed to traumatic material.

Burnout is a term that has been used since the early 1980s to describe the physical and emotional exhaustion that workers can experience when they have low job satisfaction and feel powerless and overwhelmed at work. However, burnout does not necessarily mean that our view of the world has been damaged or that we have lost the ability to feel compassion for others. Typically localized on the area of stress.

Most common signs that you or a co-worker are being impacted by their work as a helper.

Emotional distress: Individuals may experience heightened emotional sensitivity, mood swings, frequent or intense feelings of sadness, anger, or irritability.

Intrusive thoughts or images: Vivid or intrusive thoughts related to the traumatic experiences of others may occur, even when not actively thinking about work.

Sleep disturbances: Difficulties with sleep, including insomnia, nightmares, or restless sleep, can be common.

Physical symptoms: Physical manifestations of stress and trauma, such as headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, and gastrointestinal problems, may arise. These symptoms can be chronic and contribute to overall feelings of discomfort and decreased well-being.

Increased personal distress: Individuals may find themselves becoming more easily overwhelmed or experiencing a heightened sense of vulnerability. They may also start avoiding situations or triggers that remind them of traumatic experiences, leading to a restricted and limited lifestyle.

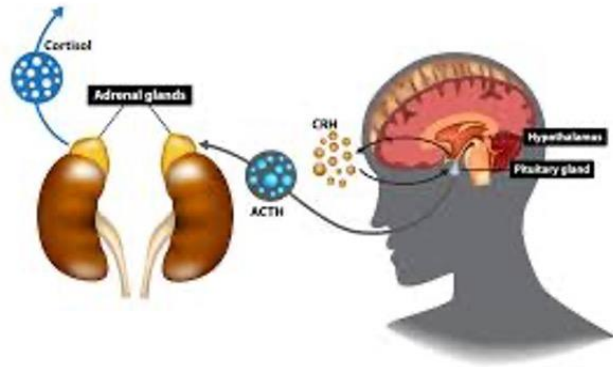
Reduced empathy and compassion fatigue: Professionals may notice a decline in their ability to empathize with others or feel emotionally connected. They may feel a sense of emotional exhaustion and a reduced capacity to provide the level of care and support they desire.

Cognitive difficulties: Difficulties with concentration, memory, and decision-making may arise. Professionals may find it challenging to focus on tasks, retain information, or make judgments effectively.

Relationship changes: Vicarious trauma can impact personal relationships, leading to increased conflicts or withdrawal from social interactions. Professionals may struggle to connect with loved ones or may isolate themselves due to emotional exhaustion or fear of burdening others with their experiences.

Professional impairment: The impact of vicarious trauma may extend into the professional realm. Professionals may experience a decrease in job satisfaction, feelings of burnout, and an overall decrease in the quality of their work. They may also exhibit signs of cynicism or detachment from clients or patients.

Health Impacts:



Sustained Stress Response:

- hormones adrenaline and cortisol remain elevated
 - Chronic stress response primarily due to overexposure to cortisol
- Results in a constant state of “fight or flight”
- Health complications parallel to those of PTSD

Long Term Effects:

Issues related to Mental health

- **Anxiety**
- **Depression**
- Negative coping strategies
- Sleep disturbances

Physical Effects

- Digestive issues
- Muscle aches and pains
- Weight gain
- **Immunocompromise**
- **Increased cardiovascular risk**
 - High blood pressure; heart disease; strokes

Prevention:
How to be proactive with your self-care



Practice Mindfulness

Develop high yield stress relievers

Care for your physical health.

Develop meaningful relationships



What is mindfulness & why is it good?



Mindfulness is an exercise of being aware of your thoughts, feelings, and body.

Types of Mindfulness:

Guided mindfulness

Meditative mindfulness

Gratitude mindfulness

Loving caring mindfulness

Resources to start mindfulness

Calm app, Headspace app





Prevention: Develop relationships.

Be purposeful in developing your relationships.

Work on spending time with your family, friend, and coworkers.

Having meaningful relationships can provides

Emotional Support

Opportunity to Share Responsibilities

Problem-Solving and Perspective

Enjoyment and Laughter

Physical touch




Prevention: Develop High Yield stress relievers.



Productive stress relievers (Best stress relievers) These are practices that you will feel good about hours after doing them. Examples: reading a book, exercise, working towards a goal, cleaning, pursuing a deeper connection with your faith/religion etc.

Distractions (Use when needed but not best) These Provide an escape from a stressful situation. Examples- watching a fun video, reading a news article, focusing on something natural.

Activities that cause emotional relief in the moment but have negative consequences. (Worst, Don't do them!)



Mindfulness exercise

Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit or lie down. Gently close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, allowing yourself to relax and let go of any tension or distractions.

Take a moment to bring your attention to your body. Feel the weight of your body on the chair or the support beneath you. Notice any sensations or areas of tension in your body without judgment.

Now, shift your attention to your breath. Begin to observe your breath as it enters and leaves your body. Notice the sensation of the breath as it moves in and out, whether it's cool or warm, shallow or deep. Follow the natural rhythm of your breath, allowing it to anchor you to the present moment.

As you continue to focus on your breath, thoughts and distractions may arise. Whenever you notice your mind wandering, simply acknowledge the thoughts or distractions and gently bring your attention back to the breath. Let go of any judgments or expectations about the experience.

Now, expand your awareness to your surroundings. Notice any sounds around you, both near and far. Allow the sounds to come and go without getting caught up in them. Embrace the present moment fully, allowing yourself to be fully present with whatever arises.

Next, bring your attention to any physical sensations in your body. Scan your body from head to toe, noticing any areas of tightness, discomfort, or relaxation. As you observe these sensations, practice accepting them without trying to change anything. Simply allow yourself to be aware of your body in this moment.

Finally, take a few moments to cultivate a sense of gratitude and compassion. Bring to mind something or someone you feel grateful for in your life. Allow that feeling of gratitude to fill your heart and extend it to yourself and others.

When you're ready, gently open your eyes and take a moment to reorient yourself to the present moment. Carry the sense of mindfulness and presence with you as you continue your day.

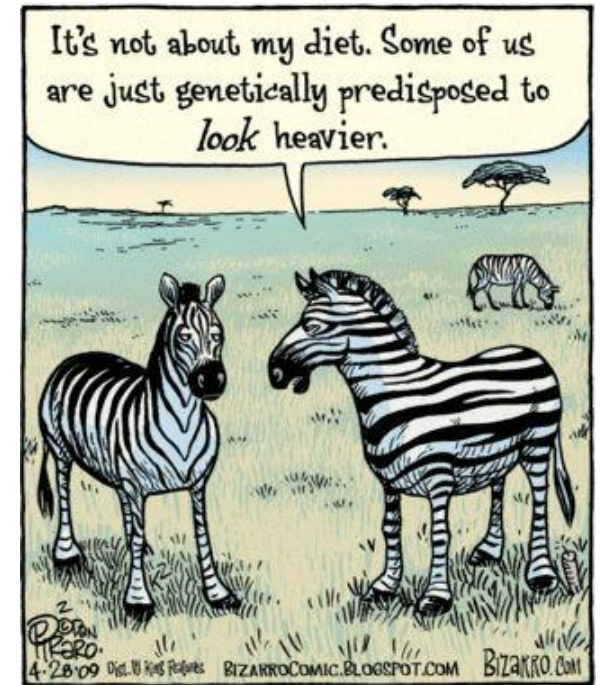
Remember, mindfulness is a skill that takes practice. The more you engage in regular mindfulness exercises like this one, the more you'll cultivate a greater sense of awareness in your life.

Prevention:

Take care of your physical health

Physical health dramatically impacts your emotional wellness and has been shown to be extremely effective in reducing stress levels and preventing depression and anxiety.

- Aim small, 15 minutes of elevated heart rate dramatically increases neuroplasticity.
- Work on formulating habits that develop physical health.



Reactive skills



01

Be purposeful
with self-care.

02

Set Boundaries.

03

Take a break /
vacation.

04

Be empathic and
patient with
yourself.

05

Practice opposite
emotions when
you're struggling.

06

Talk to someone.

07

Seek out
professional help.



BE PURPOSEFUL
WITH SELF-CARE.



Take all your Proactive self-care skills
and be more purposeful with them.

Boundaries



Clearly define and communicate expectations:

Practice active listening and empathy while maintaining professional distance:

Regularly self-assess and practice self-care:



"Is **THIS** the line you're telling me not to cross?"

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Being empathetic with self

Radical acceptance

Philosopher and psychologist William James once said, "the first step in overcoming any misfortune is to allow it to be."

Acceptance is not saying what happened is okay, and acceptance is not giving up or giving in. Acceptance is acknowledging reality so you can marshal your psychological and emotional resources to move forward and heal. Learning to accept reality and then using your skills to be as effective as possible, is the path forward and the way to end suffering.

~ Lane Peterson

Decide how to move forward.



Opposite emotion exercise



1

Step One: Be mindful of your emotion in the moment.

2

Step Two: Identify what you may be doing in that moment to prolong the emotion.

3

Step Three: Identify an activity or thing that can help you experience the opposite emotion and do it.

Talk to someone / Get professional help

Utilize the relationships you have cultivated through your self-care. This can be any one you can just vent to. I advise a mentor or a more experienced professional you respect and feel safe talking with.

When to seek out counseling

When what you're doing does not seem to help.

When you feel lost and need guidance and no one else within your support system can assist.

When you notice your emotions are severely impacting your personal or professional life.

Tips to set up counseling:

Call your insurance company to find out what your options are.

Check to see if you have access to an Employee Assistance Program.

Utilize Online therapy resources if unable to find a local in person therapist.



How to develop sustainable empathy for your clients.

Self-care: Prioritize your own well-being by engaging in self-care activities like exercise, healthy eating, restful sleep, and pursuing hobbies or activities that bring you joy.

Set boundaries: Establish clear boundaries to protect your physical, emotional, and mental energy. Learn to say no when necessary and avoid overextending yourself.

Practice self-compassion: Be kind to yourself and treat yourself with the same empathy and understanding you offer to others. Acknowledge your limitations and take breaks when needed.

Seek support: Regularly reflect on your emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Recognize signs of compassion fatigue and identify triggers or patterns that contribute to it. Adjust your approach accordingly.

Practice self-reflection: Regularly reflect on your emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Recognize signs of compassion fatigue and identify triggers or patterns that contribute to it. Adjust your approach accordingly.

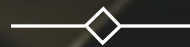
Practice self-awareness: Incorporate regular self-care rituals into your daily routine. These can include activities like journaling, taking walks in nature, practicing gratitude, or engaging in hobbies that recharge you.

Seek balance: Strive for a healthy work-life balance. Dedicate time to activities and relationships outside of your caregiving role to foster a sense of fulfillment and rejuvenation.

Continuous learning: Stay updated on best practices and new techniques in your field. Continued education and learning can provide fresh insights and enhance your ability to provide effective care while minimizing compassion fatigue.



QUESTIONS?



Resources

Mindfulness resources

[How to Train a Wild Elephant: And Other Adventures in Mindfulness](#)

By: Jan Chozen Bays MD.

Articles on Health impacts on mental health

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1470658/>

<https://www.psychiatrist.com/jcp/article/Pages/2017/v78n09/v78n0912.aspx>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022395616306475>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30941897/>

Book on developing Habits.

Atomic Habits: An Easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones.

By James Clear

Setting boundaries

Boundaries: When to say Yes, How to Say No To Take Control of Your Life.

By Henry Cloud and John Townsend

Expanded explanation on Radical Acceptance

<https://cbtpsychology.com/radical-acceptance/>

<https://www.berkeleywellbeing.com/radical-acceptance.html>

Opposite Emotion exercise

https://dbt.tools/emotional_regulation/opposite-action.php

Preventing compassion fatigue

Coming Compassion Fatigue: A Practical resilience Workbook.