Trauma Stewardship
The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children
Summer 2010
Lisa Schwab, CTS, NCC, LCPC

“Are you sure all this trauma work hasn’t gotten to you?”

“Poor practice, errors in practice, agency insensitivity to employees, rudeness among colleagues, tardiness, sloppiness, and other minor and major events taking place in practice today are excused as “secondary trauma.”

~Dr. Jon Conte~
"We are reminded that the work has inevitable benefits and challenges, that we are stewards not just of those who allow us into their lives but of our own capacity to be helpful, and that a mindful and connected journey, both internally and externally, allows us to sustain the work."

"I realized that I had come into my work armed with a burning passion and tremendous commitment, but few other internal resources. There is a time for fire, but what sustains the heat—for the long haul—is the coals. And coals I had none of. I did the work for a long time with very little ability to integrate my experiences emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, or physically."

― DCFS Caseworker~

"The great way is easy; all you have to do is let go of all your ideas, opinions, and preferences."

~ Seung Sahn~
Trauma Stewardship is defined as a daily practice through which individuals and organizations tend to the hardship, pain, or trauma experienced by humans, other living beings, or our planet itself.

~ Laura van Dernoot Lipsky~

Some Thoughts:

- We may be required to question some of our most deeply held beliefs about our lives and work.
- The most important technique is learning to stay fully present in our experience, not matter how difficult.
- When we arrive at a frightening place, we want to slow down enough to be curious about what is happening within ourselves.

Questions to Ponder

- If I am exposed to suffering in a single moment or over the arc of time, is there the possibility that I will be affected by such exposure?
- How am I different now than I was?
- “All of you are perfect, and you could use a little improvement” ~ Suzuki Roshi
Trauma Exposure Response

- A wide range of strategies we may have evolved, whether consciously or unconsciously, to contend with the trauma we have witnessed or shared in our lives or our work.
- The transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings.

Thoughts to Ponder

- Nothing has to change in the world for us to transform our own life experience.
- If we allow our happiness and sense of success to hinge on things outside of ourselves, we will wait for well-being indefinitely.
- Many traditions teach that regardless of anything external, we can create and re-create how we feel, view the world, and experience our surroundings simply by shifting our perspective.

“How wonderful it is that nobody need to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”
~Anne Frank~
Trauma stewardship challenges us in that if we are truly to know joy, we cannot afford to shut down our experience of pain.

We understand that bearing witness, amplifying the story, and taking right action are our most important tasks. But how do we witness, and what is right action?

We often confront choices that leave us feeling anguished and overwhelmed.

Trauma always creates a ripple effect, the same as when someone throws into a still pond. The initial impact creates repercussions that expand almost infinitely, reaching, and having an effect on many people who didn’t experience the blows firsthand.

The shockwaves soon move beyond individual caregivers to influence the organizations and systems in which we work and, ultimately, the society as a whole.

The harms of trauma exposure response radiate in this way, but so do the benefits of trauma stewardship.

The rule of no realm is mine, neither Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail in my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night can still grow fairer or bear fruit or flower again in days to come. For I too am a steward. Did you not know?"

—Gandolf in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King
Three Levels of Trauma Stewardship

- Individual
- Organizational
- Societal

Personal Dynamics

- What is our own history?
- What resources were available to help us?
- What led us to the work we do?
- If you are working with a population with whom you have a history, you may feel a rawness as you approach your work. For many workers it is difficult to perceive a clear line between the personal and professional.
- To be an effective trauma steward it is important to know where our own self ends and another's self begins.
- We can sustain our work with trauma only if we combine our capacity for empathy with a dedication to personal insight and mindfulness.

Organizational Tendencies

- Organizations have the potential to mitigate or exacerbate the effects of trauma exposure for all their workers.
- The way workers manage trauma will in turn have an impact on the experiences of already traumatized clients.
- Because of multiple and conflicting objectives, insufficient resources, and other difficulties, organizations often ask employees to perform demanding jobs without adequate support. As a result, people are unable to do their jobs as well as they would like.
Service Rationing

- The process that workers go through to bridge the everyday divide between the ideal of how they would work if they were free to function to the best of their ability and the reality of how they can work, given the numerous obstacles in their way.
- One effect of service rationing is the continual defining and redefining of one's job.
- Many workers walk a common path, trying to find a satisfactory compromise between what they can do and what they are asked to do.

What does Service Rationing Look Like?

- We begin to be more sympathetic to compliant clients then to belligerent ones.
- We put our energies where we feel we can make a difference and will utilize less already depleted energy.
- Service rationing is paradoxical.
- There is a desperate need for environments that help people do good work and achieve personal satisfaction even when compromises are inevitable.
- How does your workplace feel? What's the energy level?

Trauma Exposure Response & Work

- Manifests in 2 ways:
  1. Lack of Accountability
  2. Unethical Behaviors
- Often people begin to recognize the effects of trauma exposure when they are behaving in ways they never would have when they started in the field.
- Over time with scarcity of resources and feeling overwhelmed, one may begin to experience a sense of entitlement.
Societal Forces

- If we lived in a society where equity, respect, access, and justice were realized and unearned privilege and inequality and oppression were transformed, the impact of trauma exposure in our lives would look dramatically different.
- We could confront the suffering at face value, an accident, injury, a hurtful act vs. wondering if disparities between rich and poor, white people and people of color, heterosexual people and gay/lesbian/bi/transgendered people, and so on contributed to the suffering.

Trauma Exposure Response

- How does the world look and feel like a different place to you as a result of doing your work.
- A trauma exposure response has occurred when external trauma becomes internal reality.
- It's difficult to admit we are having a hard time. Many are afraid if they open that door they won't be able to shut it.
- Many employ coping mechanisms that work in the moment with the trauma, but are less effective outside of the moment, but continue to be utilized.

By the time your thirsty, you’re already dehydrated.
The 16 Warning Signs of Trauma Exposure Response

Feeling Helpless and Hopeless

- “Why am I getting out of bed?”
- Have difficulty seeing progress.
- May believe things are only getting worse.
- Feeling overwhelmed-as if nothing can remedy the situation.
- Hold themselves personally responsible for a troubled situation even when no one could reasonably be expected to master it.
- The traumatic event itself will be long lived-they see no possibility of relief.
- Believe they are likely to repeat their current struggles in another time and place. “This too shall not pass”

A Sense that One Can Never Do Enough

- A belief, “I am not doing enough and I should be doing more.”
- What messages did we get as children about sustainability and longevity?
- No matter what I do...it won’t matter.
- When our personal belief that we are not enough collides with our professional belief that we’re not doing enough, we can feel like we’re coming apart at the seams.
Hypervigilance
• Hypervigilance in our work can cause us to be solely focused on our jobs.
• Children, spouse, friends may ask, “Where are you at?”
• It’s an attempt to restore safety and prevent further victimization by anticipating and recognizing everything as a potential threat.
• We can feel like we are always “on” even during times when there is absolutely nothing that can or should be done.

Diminished Creativity
• “When was the last time I had an original thought?”
• Feeling stagnant and bored.
• “Only the person who is relaxed can create, and to that mind ideas flow like lightning.” – Cicero

Inability to Embrace Complexity
• Crave clear signs of good and bad, right and wrong
• The answer “No” comes out of your mouth constantly.
• Explanations sound like bumper sticker slogans.
• You may be dogmatic and opinionated.
• You may look to take a side in a debate no matter what the debate is about. This can also come out in our clinical work.
• A need to take sides. To take a stand.
**Minimizing**
- “I didn’t get shot, so what do I have to complain about?
- We may become inoculated to others pain.
- We mistake minimizing for triaging or prioritizing.
- Thoughts include “I can’t believe this convo is taking 20 minutes. There wasn’t even a weapon involved.”
- We lose our compassion and ability to empathize because we are comparing others suffering or putting it into a hierarchy.
- We do this to avoid reaching our breaking point.

**Chronic Exhaustion/Physical Ailments**
- There’s a difference between feeling tired because you put in a hard day’s work and feeling fatigued in every cell of your being.
- The kind of tired from trauma exposure is where your bones feel tired, your body is tired, your mind is tired, your spirit is tired, your people are tired. You can’t remember a time when you weren’t tired.
- This stems from feeling overwhelmed.
- An underrecognized factor that may contribute to our level of fatigue is the belief that we have no choice about the work we do.
- The Body Keeps the Score

**Inability to Listen/Deliberate Avoidance**
- Know anyone whose voicemail is always full? Or the only contact you have with them is through email or texting.
- The highlights of your day are when you don’t have to do your job.
- Avoidance often shows up in peoples personal lives. – not answering the phone, going out less and less
- Start to lose energy for things that once brought joy – friends, family, yoga, sports, art, etc.
**Dissociative Moments**

- Intrusive or overwhelming feelings that cause something to unhinge within you. You realize you haven’t heard the last 5 sentences of what someone just said, you’re not following the story at all.
- Instead you’re remembering the last injured animal you couldn’t save, or the day your brother was incarcerated, or the time when your child was very ill.
- In dissociative moments, we cut ourselves off from our internal experience in order to guard against sensations and emotions that could be overwhelming to our system.

**Sense of Persecution**

- Feeling a profound lack of efficacy in one’s life. We become convinced that others are responsible for our well-being and that we lack the personal agency to transform our circumstances.
- Mistreatment can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We may seek it out, focus on it, and then chalk it up as further evidence of how wronged we are.
- We can become antagonistic and reactive.
- If we listen to our own comments, we can gain excellent insight into our state of mind with regard to self-efficacy and persecution.

**Guilt**

- It can undermine the possibility of authentic connection between people.
- We get caught up in the disparity between our lives and the lives of those we serve.
- We may purposefully attempt to diminish our radiance or wellbeing, hoping to equalize the situation in the short term.
- Guilt interrupts our ability to take in and be present for the life-sustaining energy in our lives.
Fear

• Can manifest in a number of ways
• Fear of intense feelings, personal vulnerability, or of potential victimization.
• “Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” ~Yoda
• Connecting with our fear may make us feel vulnerable. We feel uncomfortable when we recognize that we have so much in common with our own clients.

Anger and Cynicism

• “When you see the suffering, when you experience it yourself, it’s very hard to not want revenge.” ~Harn Yawngwe
• How many of us feel its ok to get angry?
• Do we know how our anger looks and feels to others?
• Do we know what’s actually at the root of our anger?
• Do we know how to work with anger and resolve it in a productive way that does no harm?
• We may be unaware of our anger, even when all our loved ones, colleagues, and clients have to tiptoe around us.
• Anger is the undercurrent of cynicism. Cynicism is often witty, quick, sharp, easy to laugh at, and incredibly alluring.

Inability to Empathize/Numbing

• It’s as if you are a sponge that is completely saturated and has never been wrung out.
• We may find ourselves crying at commercials, yelling at the dog, or having feelings that are real but not necessarily congruent with the situation at hand.
• Our society is full of mechanisms that encourage numbing. (caffeine, cigarettes, food, tv, etc)
• We take a seven day vacation and are sick for the first five from an adrenaline crash.
Addictions
- We build a strong attachment to drugs, alcohol, and other distractions in an effort to numb out.
- The attachment persists despite our understanding of its potentially destructive nature.
- Ask yourself:
  - What are I most attached to? What do I count on to help me numb out? What would I be really resistant to giving up in my life?
  - Although people may not recognize it, the decision to work more and attend to their personal lives less is often a choice.
- When we believe that we lack the inner capacity to deal with our reality, we may seek out objects, activities, or relationships that will perpetuate an illusion about ourselves, numb us out, or otherwise give us distance from overwhelming feelings.

Grandiosity
- Many people get hooked on involvement in others’ lives: Solving their problems, becoming a powerful figure for them, getting increasingly attached to the feeling of being needed and useful.
- If the work is breathtakingly important then so are we.
- “I can’t take a vacation. Nobody else can do my work.”
- Tend to the part of yourself that needs to be a big diva. If we don’t we can come to feel dependent on other peoples suffering and their need of me to relieve it, for my own feeling of purpose.

New Ways to Navigate
- How do we alter our course to reach a healing path?
- How do we prevent the ripples of trauma exposure to continue to spread?
- How do we integrate the effects of trauma exposure so that we become effective trauma stewards?
- “Whole-hearted, open-minded interaction with the world” ~ Pema Chodron
Open the Inquiry

- What events and decisions are most crucial to who you are today?
- Do you find any consistent themes as you look back on your choices?
- Is what you are doing in your life working for you on all levels of your being?
- Does it edify you?
- Do you use it to escape your life?
- Does it bring you joy?
- Does it support your ego?
- Is it a place where you can do something about the pain of the world?
- Does it distract you?

Practice Self Care

- Acknowledge that your stresses are genuine and you are looking for healthier ways to deal with them.
- Characteristics of Stress Resistant Persons (van der Kolk)
  1. A Sense of Personal Control: they perceive a connection between their own actions and how they feel. They believe in their own capacity to influence their lives.
  2. Pursuit of Personally Meaningful Tasks: They are present and engaged in their lives allowing them to be active vs. passive during difficult times.
  3. Healthy Lifestyle Choices: They show "decreased use or general avoidance of known dietary stimulants of refined white sugar, caffeine, nicotine, they work out, and they make time for periods of relaxation each day.
  4. Social Support: They have relationships with others who can serve as a buffer in dealing with difficult situations.

Be Patient

- Transformation is a process.
- "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase. Just take the first step." – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
Coming into the Present Moment

- "When in doubt, take a bath." – Mae West
- We have to do some work to attune to our “felt sense.” The gauge that tells you where you are and how you feel, moment by moment.
- Avoid hyperintellectualism and just allow yourself to feel. Sit with your gut.

Creating Space for Inquiry

- Being present in the moment extends to a larger awareness of what we are doing in our lives.
- What are my motivations, intentions, and hopes?
- Why have we chosen to make the effort toward helping or healing such a prominent part of our lives?
- Before starting the workday, take a moment to stop and ask yourself, "Why am I doing what I am doing?"
- Choose a trustworthy, supportive, and wise person to consult with.
- Write your answers down and keep it somewhere.
- Ask yourself every so often: "Is this working for me?"

Choosing our Focus

- Being conscious of where we are putting our focus can teach us that we have incredible freedom in how we choose to interact with our lives.
- “I focused on what I was able to do that day. On what went well, what changed, what moved, and what I was able to do. And the rest, the rest I leave behind at the end of the day.” – Pediatrician in a community health clinic
- Identify your resources and focus on those when you feel off balance.
Building Compassion and Community

- Create a micro-culture of support around you.
- The micro-culture supports us in two ways: by showering us with encouragement and by holding us accountable.
- Those we can debrief with, laugh with, brainstorm with, consult with, cry with, and become better people with. This helps us experience compassion in action.
- This helps us to respond vs. react. We practice internal disarmament.

Finding Balance

- Whatever we can do right now to create a more holistic or integrated approach to our work is a worthwhile effort.
- What moments can you reclaim each day to attend to your inner well-being?
- Never underestimate what you can weave into your shift, work, or career to make it a healthier place for you to be.
- Breathe
- Cultivate our sense of gratitude.

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive. And go do that. Because the world needs people who’ve come alive.”

~Howard Thurman~