SUPPORTING THE SUPPORTER: VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND SUPPORT NEEDS

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What will we discuss?
What is (and is not) VT?
How does it occur?
What contributes to its development
The other side of trauma work VPTG:
What it PTG? How does it happen?
What is VPTG? – preliminary ideas and findings
Trauma (DSM IV-TR)

“A direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate.”
Depression
Aggression
Low Self-Esteem
Difficulties in Interpersonal Relationships
Identity Confusion
Guilt
Personal impact
PTSD
Beyond the personal impact
Potential negative impacts of trauma work

- Burnout
- Compassion fatigue
- Secondary Traumatic Stress (DSM 5 PTSD)
- Vicarious Trauma
Burnout

Prolonged exposure to ongoing stress

“a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do ‘people-work’ of some kind.” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981)

**Emotional Exhaustion**

Depletion of resources
Emotional unavailability

**Depersonalisation**

Cynical & negative attitudes towards clients
Dehumanisation
Feeling that clients are “not worth the effort”

**Personal accomplishment**

I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job

**(lack of) Personal accomplishment**

Negatively evaluating oneself at work
Dissatisfaction from one’s own performance

I feel like I’m at the end of my rope

I feel recipients blame me for some of their problems
Nurses, teachers, social workers, probation officers, counsellors, mental health workers, and agency administrators in the original study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency (n = 420)</th>
<th>Emotional Exhaustion</th>
<th>Depersonalization</th>
<th>Personal Accomplishment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.04</td>
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Compassion fatigue

A reduction in the capacity to bear or interest in bearing the suffering of others (Figley, 2002)

Physical and emotional exhaustion alongside a considerable reduction in the ability to feel empathy and compassion for others (Elwood et al., 2011).

Anxiety

- Desensitization to patient stories
- Stress related leaves
- An increase in clinical errors
- A decrease in quality care (e.g., “poor bedside manners”)

Depression
Secondary Traumatic Stress

Developing PTSD like symptoms when exposed another’s traumatic experiences (Figley, 1995).

- Arousal
- Intrusive thoughts
- Avoidance
- Compassion
- Fatigue

Can occur quickly and unexpectedly
Vicarious Trauma (McCann and Pearlman; 1990)

“A negative transformation in the self of a trauma worker or helper that results from empathic engagement with traumatized clients and their reports of traumatic experiences. Its hallmark is disrupted spirituality, or meaning and hope. “ (Figley, 2012)
A cognitive conservatism (stability) + consistency (coherence) = bias towards assimilation. 
Fairly stable across life-threatening information threatening existing schemas.

My
The world is benevolent

My
The world is meaningful

My
The self is worthy
Trauma Shatters the assumptions

Cognitive processing theories

A cognitive activity trying to assimilate information & rebuild our assumptive world (rumination, intrusive memories, flashbacks).

Accommodate/assimilate

Incomplete processing – continuous activation

Avoidance (no integration) PTSD (intrusive thoughts)

A new assumptive world (Accommodation)
**Vicarious Trauma** (McCann and Pearlman; 1990)

Following the “shattered assumptions” theory
Empathic engagement

Negative changes to therapists’ cognitive schema (self, other, world)
Safety, trust, esteem, intimacy, and control
Pervasive, cumulative, and permanent

Distress, heightened awareness to reconfirming material
So far, VT not trauma specific

**Motor Vehicle Accidents survivors:**

* Moderate levels of psychological symptoms in comparison to other traumas
* Varying results on psychological impact [from 1.9% PTSD (Schnyder et al., 2001) to 16% (Ehlers et al., 1998) at the 12-month follow-up].
* Psychological impact correlated with injury, previous trauma, pre-trauma depression, fear of dying, perceived threat, and subjective distressed at the time of the accident, being the driver or passenger (in Jeavons et al., 2000).

What makes this trauma “special” for VT?

- Driving is an ordinary ever day activity no linked to a particular location
- Survivors can be both victims and perpetrators; feelings of guilt & shame
Vicarious Trauma

Organisational support
- Tolerant approach
  - Work atmosphere
    - (open, accepting, communication)
  - Self care
- Work-life balance
- Social support
- Spirituality
- Humour
- Optimism

Vicarious Trauma

Gender
Women tend to report higher levels of VT

% trauma work in caseload
Not merely the volume of work but the diversity of it

Personal trauma history
May be triggered and then linked to VT but it depends on how well it was processed

Overall exposure

Personal stress
Domestic problems; Caring for parents; Bereavement

Negative coping strategies
Self medicating; Withdrawal

Beck, 2011; Sabin-Farrell & Turpin, 2003
Beyond “surviving the job”

Adopting the PTG model to a vicariously traumatic situation
What is Growth not?

Coping /Adaptation
Dealing with…, functioning

Resilience
Inner ability to decrease negative impact of event

Benefit findings/positive outcomes
Looking for the positives in what had happened

Happiness (eudemonia vs hedonistic WB)
Emotional response

So, what is it???
A relative term for naturally occurring post-trauma cognitive changes to schemas (assumptive world) in comparison to pre-trauma; which are perceived as positive
Assumptive world

Trigger event

Posttraumatic processing

Disconfirmation of existing assumptions

Confirmation of existing assumptions

Disparity

Accommodation

Assimilation

Support

Personality

Eudaimonic

Schema specific

Positive

Negative

New assumptive world

Growth

Depression

Joseph, 2009

Rigidity & vulnerability
Tedeschi and Calhoun

Trauma

Beliefs & Coping to manage distress

Post trauma ruminative activity

Trying to “make sense”

Distressing

Less stress

Successful adaptation

Disengagement with pre-trauma

Growth

Growth in personal strength

I am stronger than I thought I was

Spiritual change

I have stronger faith

New life possibilities

I am able to do better things with my life

Relationship to others

I can count on people when in need

More compassionate

Appreciation of life

Appreciating every day

Social support (comfort)
Vicarious Posttraumatic Growth

Cognitive positive changes to schemas as a result of trauma work
Vicarious Posttraumatic Growth

**Vicarious Trauma**

- Exposure to Traumatic narrative
- + Empathy
- Shattered Assumptions
- Vicarious Trauma

**Vicarious Traumatic Growth**

- Exposure to what? + Empathy?
- ?
- Schematic change (assumptive world?)
- ?
- Vicarious
- Posttraumatic Growth
If VPTG is like VT; does it happen through empathy?

Participants:
118 UK registered psychologists and therapists
Online and mailed questionnaires

Gender - male: \( n = 38 \); female: \( n = 80 \)

Age - 27 to 73 years (\( M = 45.97, \ SD = 11.67 \))

Practice - private (27%), public sector (32%) combination (41%)

Experience – 1 to 50 years (\( M = 13.77, \ SD = 10.56 \))

Overall positive link between Empathy & PTG but only in “Growth in relation to others”

Inconclusive

Borckhouse, Msetfi, Cohen, et al. (2011)
What is the construct VPTG? Exploratory

Spelvins, Cohen, Joseph et al. (2010)

Structured interviews, IPA analysis

8 interpreters (freelance basis, NW).
Worked with refugees and asylum seekers in a therapeutic setting
Gender - 2 men, 6 women
Experience - 3 - 8 years
Age - 30 - 64 years ($M = 46$)
English was their second language
Feeling what you client feels

Empathy/identification

Distress, negative reactions

Positive emotions

Time

Finding Your Own Way to Deal With It

Coping with distress – shield/”sucked into it”

Personal

Family support

Prof support

Beyond Belief

Shock – trauma narrative

Shock – human resilience

A Different Person

richer

wiser

better

deeper

Vulnerable
What have we learned?

• The “shock” of the client’s growth as a potential contributing factor

• Psychological distance (Empathy? Similarity?) from the clients impact on negative emotions

• A possible link between the VT and VPTG (you have to go through the bad to experience the good)

Cohen & Collens (2012)

A metasynthesis:

A qualitative secondary analysis/ interpretation of existing qualitative findings.
Empathic engagement with traumatised clients

Negative emotions
Distress
Somatic responses

Shock

Questioning & meaning making

Coping
Organisational support
Informal support
Self care
Optimism
Spirituality
Separations

Decreased distress

Time

Decreased distress

Witnessing clients’ growth

Nature of trauma work

CHANGE

World views

World is unsafe
Mistrusting others

Human resilience
Appreciation of life

Values

Importance of family & friends
Social justice awareness

Self

Compassion
Wisdom
Self awareness
Self worth
Better professionals

Day to day life

More distance in relationships
Over-protective parenting

Social activism
Better parenting
What does it add?

• Reinforcing the VPTG route through vicarious exposure to clients’ growth ("Resilience Shock").

Implications?
Long terms vs short term work (SW/helpline workers vs therapists)

• Changes in particular schemas and not an overall change
Implications?
Things do not need to be perfect for growth to happen

• The type of trauma work
Summary
How to avoid VT & facilitate VPTG?

- Not all distressing impact is VT (sustainable change to schema vs local and appropriate emotional response)

- Prevention (beyond individual):
  Diversify work
  Find support (go for a coffee/pint)
  Self care

- Detection:
  Psychoeducation – see the signs in you and in others
  Particular times in personal life

Facilitating growth

Catch 22…..
Growth is not the same as positive coping or happiness
Naturally occurring
Be mindful of it & Reflect from time to time