Vicarious trauma:
Toward a scientific understanding &
and sustainable advocacy

Christopher Wilson, Psy.D.
1020 SW Taylor Street, Suite 245
Portland, OR 97205
www.drchristopherwilso.com
Twitter? @drchriswilson
Before we begin

- Science versus theory
- Ask questions as we go!
- A little bit about who I am...
Goals for this session

- Gain a scientific understanding of vicarious trauma
- Gain a practical understanding of vicarious trauma
- Understand what YOU can do
- Understand what your ORGANIZATION can do
What is your definition?

Trauma is a physical, cognitive, an emotional response to events and situations that are distressing, and overwhelm a person's existing or previous coping mechanisms.

Backed up by neuroscience now

It's subjective not objective
"Trauma is not a disorder but a reaction to a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situations in the real world and, indeed, to a world in which people are routinely wounded."

Bonnie Burstow (2003)
Vicarious trauma

- The **cumulative** impact of working with traumatized clients:
  - listening to, reading about, or viewing photographs or videos of traumatic events.

- Vicarious trauma is a **transformation** inside the individual working with traumatized clients that can impact *one’s world view, sense of self, spirituality, relationships, and emotion regulation.*
Is it real?

  - Cast doubt on the concept of vicarious trauma
  - Based critique on a lack of research that showed those who worked with trauma survivors suffered measurable symptoms above baseline.
Is it real?

From Kessler et al. (2005)
- Lifetime prevalence rates for PTSD: 6.8%
- Past 12 months (in 2003): 3.5%

From Levin et al. (2012)
- Found PTSD rates between 9% and 15% for those working with traumatized clients
What’s it look like?

- Re-experiencing
- Avoidance
- Disturbed sleep, irritability or increased startle response
- Cynicism/lack of hope
- Feeling down, tired, depressed
- Lack of interest in previously pleasurable activities
- Negative perceptions of work/self
The science behind the experience

- Monkey see...monkey do...
- Monkey see...monkey’s brain fires like he’s doing...
- What the WHAT???
- It’s all about the “magic” of mirror neurons
Mirror neurons in 2 minutes

- Our brains “mirror” what we see visually based on intent!
  - It’s not just the motor activity, it’s the intent that matters

- These mirror neurons also appear connected to the limbic system (emotional system)
  - When we mirror the motor activity of facial expression, it allows for emotional resonance (or empathy)

- It’s not learned – it appears to be part of who we are.
The science behind the experience

Look at this photo and take it in...
The science behind the experience

Now turn to your neighbor and describe what you saw
Putting it all together

- I sit with folks who tell me their stories

- My brain’s mirror neurons fire automatically and to some degree I may experience what I’m hearing or seeing

- This empathic response is heightened if I genuinely care about the individual with whom I’m working
Hold on a minute here!

At this point you may be thinking three things...

- I’m not a therapist!
- I’m an attorney/staff member in a legal organization!
- What’s this got to do with me?
Putting it all together

- Theory of automatic vs controlled empathy
  - No research to support the concept but it makes sense
  - It might explain why even attorneys and those who are not therapists experience vicarious trauma
What do you feel or notice in your body right now?
Vicarious trauma and attorneys

This is where it all started:

- Levin & Greisberg (2003)
  - Attorneys working in family and criminal courts demonstrated higher levels of secondary trauma and burnout compared to mental health professionals and social service workers
Vicarious trauma and attorneys

- Vrklevski & Franklin (2008)
  - Study of criminal attorneys versus civil attorneys: found more depressive symptoms, subjective stress, and changes in sense of safety and intimacy among the criminal attorneys

- Hasnain, Naz, & Bano (2010)
  - Criminal attorneys reported higher levels of stress than civil attorneys. Difference was only observed in attorneys with more than 10 years experience.
Vicarious trauma and attorneys

- Piwowarczyk et al. (2009)
  - Among attorneys specializing in asylum cases, hours per week devoted to cases correlated with level of trauma

- Levin et al. (2011)
  - Attorneys who work with trauma-exposed clients are more likely to exhibit symptoms of PTSD than those who do not
Vicarious trauma and attorneys

- Levin et al. (2012)
  - Longitudinal study over 10 months with public defenders with exposure to ave of 41-60 traumatized clients over 3 mos.

- 15% and 9% met criteria for PTSD and 43% and 40% met criteria for depression at Time 1 and 2 respectively

- Higher levels of exposure to working with traumatized clients predicted higher levels of symptoms in attorneys and decreased hours at work
So who’s at risk?

- Pretty much anyone who works with traumatized clients
- It’s about exposure
- So what can you do to mitigate the impact?
Prevention...sort of...

- In the words of Irwin M. Fletcher...we’re in a bit of a grey area. How grey you ask? Charcoal.

- Bober & Regehr (2006)
  - Their research suggests that prevention is more of a systemic issue than an individual issue (consistent with the previously presented research)
Coping with vicarious trauma

- A few studies have looked at how you can cope with (and one study suggests avoid) vicarious trauma.

- Wasco & Campbell (2002)
  - Rely on your spiritual or religious beliefs to help you make meaning
  - Sooth yourself
  - Connect with friends, family
  - Put into words the painful details and feelings you experience (for example with a supervisor/team)
Coping with vicarious trauma

• Harrison & Westwood (2009)
  • Counter isolation (use your team/staff to debrief)
  • Develop mindful self-awareness (w/out judgment)
  • Embrace complexity/practice active optimism
  • Holistic self care
  • Honor your limits
  • Create meaning
  • Be spiritually connected
Some new developments

- Holmes et al. (2009)

- Cognitive science suggests distracting the brain after viewing traumatic images lessens incidence of flashbacks – yes, they had folks play Tetris!

- It’s uncertain whether this is an excuse to play Angry Birds or whether the distraction needs to avoid narrative context
So what are you saying?

- Stay connected in your relationships: disclose your experience (if not the details of the trauma)

- Stay connected to yourself: be mindfully aware

- Stay connected to your life’s mission: make meaning, stay positive, embrace the dialectic
Mindfulness

- It’s nonjudgmental awareness
- It’s enhancement of compassion (awareness of others’ suffering)
- It’s non a religious practice – it’s a human practice!
- Think of it as brain training
Mindfulness for all

- It’s simple
  - Pick an object of focus
  - Notice when you lose your focus
  - Compassionately but intentionally re-focus

- You can do it all day and no one will know
Mindfulness for all

- Siegel (2007) suggests that mindfulness is the coordination of our intentional and autonomic systems, leading to response flexibility...

- Davidson (2012) has shown that being mindful soothes the sub-cortical regions of your brain that get activated by trauma/vicarious trauma!
Notice your breath, notice your emotion, notice your wandering mind

Come back to your breath, compassionately

Stay with your breath while you notice
Notice your breath, notice your emotion, notice your wandering mind

Come back to your breath, compassionately

Stay with your breath while you notice
Sustainable advocacy

- Take a minute and think about why you work here.
- Is it safe to assume you’re here because you already acknowledge there is suffering and injustice in the world?
- What can you do to ensure that you’ll not lose your faith in humanity?
Your personal plan

- How will you stay connected?
- How will you distract?
- How will you increase positive emotion?
- How will you remember the why/meaning?
Questions? Comments?

Please feel free to contact me:
chris@drchristopherwilson.com

Follow me on Twitter:
@drchriswilson

Visit my website:
www.drchristopherwilson.com