

Panel Discussion: The Role of Empathy and Mindfulness when Working with Trauma

Level: Introductory; Keywords: Trauma, Death, Resources/Research

Trauma / Thanatology:

Factors of a sudden, untimely, or unexpected death-loss:

- Natural vs. human-caused disasters
- The degree of intentionality
- The degree of preventability
- Suffering
- Scope
- The degree of expectedness

Hallmark Symptoms of Trauma:

- Intrusive Symptoms: thoughts, flashbacks, nightmares
- Avoidance of reminders of trauma.
- Negative Mood, guilt, isolation.
- Hyper-arousal

Trauma and the Brain & Body:

- Brain imaging studies have shown a hyperactivation and hypertrophy of the amygdala
 - Contributes to increased emotional reactivity and hyper-arousal.
- Chronic exposure to stress leads to an atrophy of the hippocampal neurons
 - May contribute to trauma-related amnesia and poor working-memory functioning.
- Reticular Activating System: Involved in activation of the brain for behavioral arousal, and different levels of awareness as well as the modulation of the perception of pain
 - Implicated in fatigue and memory loss post-trauma.
- Disrupted emotional responses may lead to disrupted homeostasis and immune system functioning

Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

Vicarious Traumatization - exposure to the traumatic experience of others.

Compassion Fatigue - “a state of tension and preoccupation with the traumatized patients by re-experiencing the traumatic events, avoidance/numbing of reminders, persistent arousal (e.g. anxiety) associated with the patient” (Figley, 2002, 1435).

Predictors of Compassion Fatigue:

- 1) Empathic Ability
- 2) Empathic Concern
- 3) Exposure
- 4) Empathic Response
- 5) Compassion Distress
- 6) Sense of Achievement
- 7) Disengagement
- 8) Prolonged Exposure
- 9) Traumatic Recollections
- 10) Life Disruptions

Empathy

Bottom-Up Empathic Processes:

- Emotional Contagion
- Mimicry of emotional cues
- Classical Conditioning

Benefits:

- Automatic empathetic processes inform understanding without too much effort
- Purposeful imitation and mirroring help to “feel one’s way” into other’s experience
- Helper’s posture and affect can help modulate client’s affect

Challenges

- May lead to emotional and physical distress and discomfort without awareness of source
- May distract from client’s expressed experience
- Helper’s anxiety can modulate client’s affect if shown on therapist’s face/posture

3 Latest Grief Myths

Myth 1: *Resiliency masquerading as “return to normal” seen as “gold standard for grief recovery”*

Myth 2: *“Okay to not be okay”*

Myth 3: *Is it compassion fatigue or moral injury?*

Mindfulness as Self-Care

5 Principles of Trauma-Centered Mindfulness

1. Stay Within The Window Of Tolerance
2. Shift Attention To Support Stability: Avoiding The Fear/Immobility Cycle
3. Keep The Body In Mind: Working With Dissociation
4. Practice In Relationship: Support Safety & Stability In Survivors
5. Understand Social Context: Working Effectively Across Difference

Top-Down Empathic Processes:

- Self-Other Awareness
- Perspective Taking
- Emotional Regulation
- Executive Functioning
- Language

Benefits:

- Perspective-taking informs client’s felt experience
- Understanding what is unsaid
- Flexible perspective-shifting
- Differentiating empathy from countertransference

Challenges

- May leave helper susceptible to vicarious trauma
- Continual reasoning and analysis may distract from being present
- Without some experience of emotion, empathetic responses may be delivered without genuineness