

TRAUMA EXPOSURE/TRAUMA CONTAGION IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE WORK: WHY IT MATTERS. HOW TO ADDRESS IT.

2024 Pennsylvania Criminal Justice Advisory Board (CJAB) Conference

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- Trauma Informed Leadership Certificate, University of North Florida
- Building Trauma-Informed Organizations Certificate; National Victim Assistance Academy Advanced Skills Institute
- Trauma-Informed Facilitation; Nonprofit Learning Lab
- Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (H.O.P.E.) Certificate; Tufts Clinical and Translational Science Institute
- Baldwin Fellow: Trauma, Resilience & Trauma-Informed Communities, Lancaster County Community Foundation
- Brain Story Certification, Alberta Family Wellness Initiative
- Creating Resilient Communities Accelerator Certification, PACES Connection
- Foster Resilience Training Institute
- Enhancing Trauma Awareness Certificate, Lakeside Global Institute
- Mental Health First Aid

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- List direct and indirect sources of trauma exposure for criminal justice professionals
- Define vicarious trauma, corrections fatigue and negative resilience
- List personal, professional and workplace impacts of trauma exposure and trauma contagion
- Assess personal and organizational levels of trauma exposure and trauma contagion
- List effective individual, supervisory and organizational strategies for limiting trauma exposure and reducing risk of trauma contagion

SELECTED SOURCES

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- Trauma Responsive Courts Curriculum: Self-Care Toolkit: <https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/215874/1961190/flcourts-selfcare-toolkit.pdf>
- US Dept of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Vicarious Trauma Toolkit: <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/introduction>

FIRST, SOME DEFINITIONS

- Vicarious Trauma
- Corrections Fatigue / Compassion Fatigue
- Negative Resilience

VOCABULARY: VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- ◆ “Vicarious trauma (VT) refers to the profound shift in the world view experienced by people who work with traumatized people. Vicarious trauma occurs when the stories we hear from the people we work with “transfer onto us in a way where we too are traumatized by the images and details, even though we did not experience them ourselves.”

(Mathieu, F. (2012). The Compassion Fatigue Workbook. P. 9)

Source: Trauma Responsive Courts Curriculum: Self-Care Toolkit:

<https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/215874/1961190/flcourts-selfcare-toolkit.pdf>

VOCABULARY:
CORRECTIONS FATIGUE/COMPASSION FATIGUE

- ▶ the **cumulative negative transformation** of [criminal justice] professionals' **self** or **personality** over time as a result of **insufficient personal** and/or **organizational strategies** and/or **resources** for adapting to the demands of [criminal justice] work.
- ▶ affects individuals, teams, and eventually even the entire workforce culture of corrections institutions and offices

Source: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Dr. Michael Denhof, Gregory Morton, <https://info.nicic.gov/virt/sites/info.nicic.gov/virt/files/Corrections-Fatigue-Part1-slides.pdf>; Dr. Caterina Spinaris, <http://www.corrections.com/news/article/43840-corrections-fatigue-corrections-fulfillment-in-a-nutshell>



VOCABULARY: NEGATIVE RESILIENCE

- ▶ Negative resilience is the **appearance** of bouncing back after trauma exposure, when **in reality** the person is coping poorly or struggling
- ▶ Typically driven by a belief that appearing to be “tough” under all circumstances and not showing “soft” emotions such as sadness or tenderness, is the best way to successfully handle stress and danger

Source: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, "Breaking the 'I'm Good!' Code of Silence: <https://desertwaters.com/breaking-the-im-good-code-of-silence/>



“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

(Remen, 2006)

From “Intro to Vicarious Trauma for Law Enforcement”

https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/VT_Intro_To_VT_For_Law_Enforcement.pptx

IMPACTS OF TRAUMA EXPOSURE AND TRAUMA CONTAGION
ON INDIVIDUALS



SOURCES OF **DIRECT** TRAUMA EXPOSURE FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS

- Witnessing/Responding to crime scenes, violent or dangerous situations
- Witnessing/Responding to accidents, fires, natural disasters
- Witnessing/Responding to mental health, medical or other crises
- Responding to suicide attempts, completed suicides
- Enduring verbal abuse, harassment, threats, physical assaults, property vandalization, etc in relation to your job
- Having family members threatened, harassed or assaulted in relation to your job

SOURCE: National Institute of Corrections White Paper: Impact of Traumatic Exposure on Corrections Professionals; Spinaris, Danhof & Morton, December, 2013) https://info.nicic.gov/virt/sites/info.nicic.gov/virt/files/06/Impact_of_Traumatic_Exposure.pdf

SOURCES OF **INDIRECT** TRAUMA EXPOSURE FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS

- Reading criminal records, PSI, other documents with graphic descriptions
- Viewing photos/videos of injuries of staff or justice-involved individuals due to assaults
- Reporting injuries or deaths of staff or justice-involved individuals
- Formal debriefings/incident reviews following critical incidents
- Testifying in court regarding violent or traumatic incidents
- Threats or actual violence against staff by justice-involved individuals
- Hearing justice-involved individuals describe their own traumatic experiences
- Hearing justice-involved individuals describe their crimes
- Ad hoc conversations with colleagues or others about cases with violent/gruesome material (“sliming”)

SOURCE: National Institute of Corrections White Paper: Impact of Traumatic Exposure on Corrections Professionals; Spinaris, Denhof & Meerton, December, 2013) https://info.nicic.gov/virt/sites/info.nicic.gov/virt/files/06/Impact_of_Traumatic_Exposure.pdf





THE STRESS RESPONSE (FIGHT / FLIGHT / FREEZE)

- The brain and body's alarmed and alert response to a threatening situation
- This response system gets activated automatically. We can't stop or control it.
- It is integral to the life and survival of every living organism
- Our natural defense against danger

From "Intro to Vicarious Trauma for Law Enforcement"

https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/ojpasset/Documents/VT_Intro_to_VT_for_Law%20Enforcement-508.pdf

THE BRAIN & THE STRESS RESPONSE (FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE)

4

Prefrontal Cortex ("Thinking Brain")

- * Thinking, speaking, memory, decision-making, problem solving
- * Goes "offline" during trauma

Trauma damage can result in difficulty focusing, poor memory, and difficulty with critical thinking.

2

TRAUMA HORMONE "SOUP"

Adrenaline

Cortisol

Nor-
epinephrine

Endogenous
opioids &
oxytocin

1

Amygdala ("Smoke alarm")

- * Repeated/persistent trauma (toxic stress) conditions amygdala for constant "threat mode" —> increased anxiety & fearfulness; hyper/hypo-arousal

3

Brainstem ("Survival Brain")

- * Breathing, heart rate, temperature
- * Takes over during trauma (Fight/Flight/Freeze)

THE BODY & THE STRESS RESPONSE (FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE)



IMPACTS OF REPEATED ACTIVATION OF FIGHT/FLIGHT/FREEZE ON THE BODY

BRAIN

Difficulty concentrating, anxiety, depression, irritability, mood, mind fog

CARDIOVASCULAR

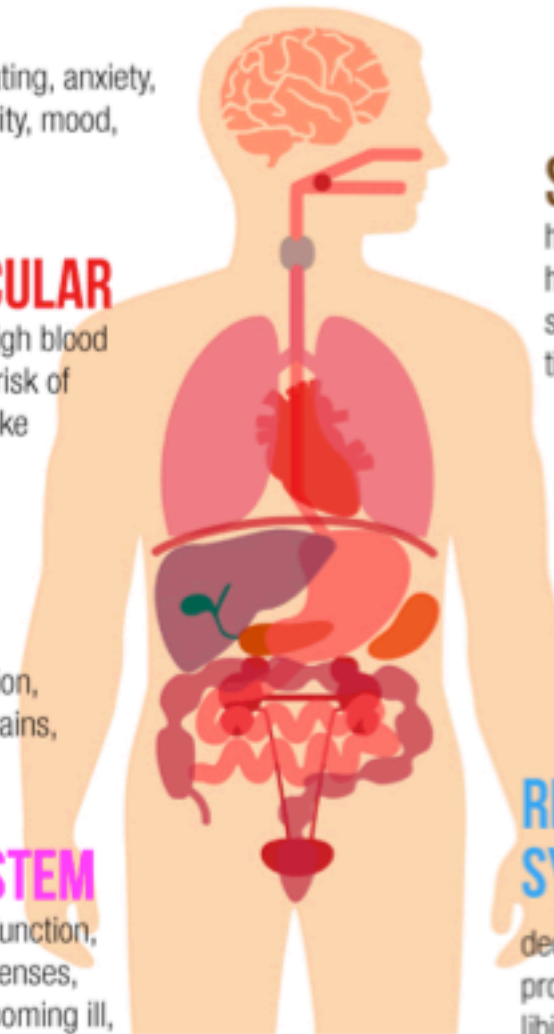
higher cholesterol, high blood pressure, increased risk of heart attack and stroke

JOINTS AND MUSCLES

increased inflammation, tension, aches and pains, muscle tightness

IMMUNE SYSTEM

decreased immune function, lowered immune defenses, increased risk of becoming ill, increase in recovery time



SKIN

hair loss, dull/brittle hair, brittle nails, dry skin, acne, delayed tissue repair

GUT

nutrient absorption, diarrhea, constipation, indigestion, bloating, pain and discomfort

REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

decreased hormone production, decrease in libido, increase in PMS symptoms

PERSONAL IMPACTS OF FREQUENT TRAUMA EXPOSURE

- **PHYSICAL:** Rapid pulse/breathing, headaches, impaired immune system, fatigue, aches
- **EMOTIONAL:** Feelings of powerlessness, numbness, anxiety, guilt, fear, anger, depletion, hypersensitivity, sadness, helplessness, severe emotional distress or physical reactions to reminders
- **BEHAVIORAL:** Irritability, sleep and appetite changes, isolate from friends and family, self destructive behavior, increased suicide risk, impatience, nightmares, hyper-vigilance, moody, easily startled or frightened, substance use
- **SPIRITUAL:** Loss of purpose, loss of meaning, questioning goodness versus evil, disillusionment, questioning prior religious beliefs, pervasive hopelessness
- **COGNITIVE:** Diminished concentration, cynicism, pessimism, preoccupation with clients, traumatic imagery, inattention, self doubt, racing thoughts, recurrent and unwanted distressing thoughts
- **RELATIONAL:** Withdrawn, decreased interest in intimacy or sex, isolation from friends or family, minimization of others' concerns, projection of anger or blame, intolerance, mistrust; may become cold, distant, uncaring, indifferent, callous toward others, including loved ones; lowered empathy

(Adapted from J.Yassen in Figley, 1995)

QUICK CHECK-IN / PERSONAL REFLECTION: WHICH OF THESE HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED YOURSELF OR WITNESSED IN STAFF OR PEERS IN THE PAST 30 DAYS?

SOURCES: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Dr. Michael Denhof, Gregory Merton, <https://info.nicic.gov/virt/sites/info.nicic.gov/virt/files/Corrections-Fatigue-Part1-slides.pdf> ; "Intro to Vicarious Trauma for Law Enforcement"
https://owc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/VT_Intro_To_VT_For_Law_Enforcement.pptx

PROFESSIONAL IMPACTS OF FREQUENT TRAUMA EXPOSURE

- **PERFORMANCE:** Decrease in quality/quantity of work, low motivation, task avoidance or obsession with detail, working too hard, setting perfectionist standards, difficulty with inattention, forgetfulness
- **MORALE:** Decrease in confidence, decrease in interest, negative attitude, apathy, dissatisfaction, demoralization, feeling undervalued and unappreciated, disconnected, reduced compassion
- **RELATIONAL:** Detached/withdrawn from co-workers, poor communication, conflict, impatience, intolerance of others, sense of being the “only one who can do the job”
- **BEHAVIORAL:** Calling out, arriving late, overwork, exhaustion, irresponsibility, poor follow-through

(Adapted from J.Yassen in Figley, 1995)

**QUICK CHECK-IN / PERSONAL REFLECTION:
WHICH OF THESE HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED YOURSELF OR
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https://owc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/VT_Intro_To_VT_For_Law_Enforcement.pptx

RATES OF NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF TRAUMA EXPOSURE ON PROFESSIONALS IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE WORK

Social workers, Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault professionals:

- ◆ 65% had at least one symptom of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) (Bride, 2007)
- ◆ 70% experienced vicarious trauma (Lobel, 1997)

Attorneys:

- ◆ Criminal & family court lawyers more affected by secondary traumatic stress (STS) than Mental Health professionals (Juvenile Law Reader, 13:3, 2016)
- ◆ 34% of Public Defenders met criteria for STS, and 75% met the criteria for functional impairment (Juvenile Law Reader, 13:3, 2016)

Judges:

- ◆ Higher burnout levels than doctors & prison wardens (Curtis, 2010)

Corrections Professionals

- ◆ 26% had moderate to severe depression (3x higher than US genl pop) and 17% had both depression and PTSD (Denhof & Spinaris, 2011)

Law Enforcement:

- ◆ Officer deaths by suicide 2X higher than traffic accidents and felonious assaults (FBI LEOKA National Study on Police Suicides, 2012)
- ◆ 56.1% scored high on the depersonalization scale (Hawkins, 2001)

IMPACTS OF TRAUMA EXPOSURE AND TRAUMA CONTAGION
ON ORGANIZATIONS

THE CYCLE OF TRAUMA EXPOSURE AND TRAUMA CONTAGION

ORGANIZATIONAL

Operational issues

- * Workload/staff shortages
- * Overtime
- * Harsh physical environment
- * High levels of trauma exposure
- * Lack of training & staff wellness resources

Organizational culture

- * Lack of acknowledgment of demands/impacts of the work
- * "I'm good" code of silence



INDIVIDUAL



Sources: Adapted from Denhof & Spinaris, 2014, Theoretical Process Model of Corrections Fatigue; Dr. Caterina Spinaris, National Institute of Corrections webinar: The Corrections Profession: Maintaining Safety and Sanity. <https://nicic.gov/health-and-wellness-for-corrections-professionals>

TRAUMA IN WORKPLACE CULTURE

- In many CJ workplaces, staff distress due to extremely stressful & traumatizing nature of the job is:
 - Not acknowledged or validated
 - Not viewed as legitimate, understandable or acceptable
 - Sometimes even “punished” (passed over for promotions, re-assignment, etc)
- Resulting staff responses:
 - Denial: “I’m good”; don’t acknowledge true feelings or impact
 - Fear, shame, stigma
 - Don’t ask for or seek help or relational support
 - May not practice healthy self-care
 - Dissociation - lack of awareness of one’s emotions and thoughts
 - “checking out”, avoidance, numbing, sometimes through substance use, other unhealthy behaviors
 - All of this affects professional functioning
 - Ultimately may “crash” or reach a breaking point → increased suicide risk

Source: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, “Breaking the “I’m Good!” Code of Silence: <https://desertwaters.com/breaking-the-im-good-code-of-silence/>

TRAUMA CONTAGION IN THE WORKPLACE

When staff are highly traumatized, the entire workforce culture is affected:

- * Cynicism
- * Pessimism
- * Poor communication
- * Resentment
- * Unresolved conflicts
- * Reduced capacity for empathy
- * High levels of authoritarianism
- * Increased potential for aggression



Source: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, National Institute of Corrections webinar: The Corrections Profession: Maintaining Safety and Sanity
<https://nicic.gov/health-and-wellness-for-corrections-professionals>

THE “I’M GOOD” CODE OF SILENCE

- Peer & organizational pressure to deny personal distress/emotional turmoil from the job
- Workplace culture: “weak”, not worthy of respect, undependable in crisis, unfit for job
- Workplace culture rewards toughness, being impervious, cynicism, dark/morbid humor
- Starts in Training Academies: new recruits indirectly traumatized by training materials (videos/discussions of violent, traumatic scenarios); no attention to traumatizing aspects of training; communicates expectation of being impervious to traumatic aspects of the job; become desensitized to trauma exposure

Source: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, “Breaking the ‘I’m Good!’ Code of Silence: <https://desertwaters.com/breaking-the-im-good-code-of-silence/>

THE “I’M GOOD” CODE OF SILENCE

- Staff may fear ridicule, being passed over for promotions or reassigned, deemed “unfit”
- “Us against them” dynamic between staff and offenders: view each other as a threat / the enemy; resulting power struggles
- Staff do whatever necessary to look strong, invincible, impenetrable, no matter what
- Just as damaging as silence about professional misconduct
- Impact on staff well-being can be deadly

Source: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, “Breaking the ‘I’m Good!’ Code of Silence: <https://desertwaters.com/breaking-the-im-good-code-of-silence/>

CAVEATS

- ▶ It IS essential:
 - ▶ To train staff about what they might encounter on the job
 - ▶ To evaluate who is ready for/capable of doing this work
 - ▶ For staff to be able to keep it together & function while on duty & during critical incidents

- ▶ It is ALSO essential to:
 - ▶ Acknowledge realities and impacts of the work
 - ▶ Allow & support staff to face distress, own it, process it & grow from it

Source: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, "Breaking the 'I'm Good!' Code of Silence: <https://desertwaters.com/breaking-the-im-good-code-of-silence/>

HOW TO ADDRESS TRAUMA EXPOSURE AND TRAUMA CONTAGION

MANAGER/LEADER STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING STAFF TRAUMA EXPOSURE

- It starts with US - where are you on the continuum from health resilience to burnout?
- How are you tending to your own well-being / wellness?

**QUICK INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY: Lifestyle Behaviors Assessment -
Univ of Buffalo**

MANAGER/LEADER STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING STAFF TRAUMA EXPOSURE

- Invite and normalize talking about realities and impacts of the work
- Transparent sharing & modeling by organizational leaders
 - Share stories of your own struggles and impact of the work on you
 - Share stories of how / when you've sought help and the results
 - Model healthy self-care practices
- Be sure staff know you have their back
- Provide supportive leadership and quality supervision
- Debrief regularly with staff / avoid "sliming" ("Low Impact Debriefing" training)
- Host staff/team meetings, retreats, formal and informal opportunities to socialize
- Encourage formal and informal peer support

**QUICK CHECK-IN / PERSONAL REFLECTION:
WHICH OF THESE DO YOU ALREADY DO REGULARLY?**

SOURCES: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, "Breaking the "I'm Good" Code of Silence": <https://desertwaters.com/breaking-the-im-good-code-of-silence/> US Dept of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Vicarious Trauma Toolkit: <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/introduction>

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING STAFF TRAUMA EXPOSURE

- Break the "I'm good" code of silence
- Provide proactive, ongoing education for staff at all levels about trauma & strategies for resilience/wellness
- Provide family education on impact of trauma, how to address it, available resources
- Encourage and support staff health and wellness (practices, programs, policies)
- Encourage and normalize asking for support and accessing resources
- Provide information on organizational and community wellness resources
- Examine policies on mandatory overtime

**QUICK CHECK-IN / PERSONAL REFLECTION:
WHICH OF THESE ARE BEING DONE IN YOUR AGENCY?**

SOURCES: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, "Breaking the "I'm Good" Code of Silence: <https://desertwaters.com/breaking-the-im-good-code-of-silence/> US Dept of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Vicarious Trauma Toolkit: <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/introduction>

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING STAFF TRAUMA EXPOSURE

PROVIDE RESOURCES INCLUDING:

- Peer supports
- Chaplains
- CISM teams
- Mental health resources, EAP
- Staff wellness programs & resources
- Family member education and support
- Field training officers
- Community-based resources
- Educational materials

Source: Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, "Breaking the 'I'm Good!' Code of Silence: <https://desertwaters.com/breaking-the-im-good-code-of-silence/>

SOME ADDITIONAL SPECIALIZED RESOURCES

COMPASSION SATISFACTION
Low Risk
Stress is low and manageable

Moderate Risk
High stress but manageable

COMPASSION FATIGUE
High Risk
Stress is becoming unmanageable

BURNOUT
Chronic feelings of Exhaustion, Cynicism, and Inefficacy

STAFF & LEADERSHIP TRAINING AVAILABLE: Compassion Resilience, Compassion Fatigue Self-Assessment, Trauma Exposure Assessment, Low Impact Debriefing Technique - contact Melanie Snyder - melaniegsnyder@gmail.com, 717-572-2110

NAMI resources: family caregivers, frontline professionals:
<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey>

Vicarious Trauma Toolkits for EMS / Law Enforcement
<https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/introduction>
MH toolkit for first responders: <https://www.health.pa.gov/>

Discuss workload, balance, trauma exposure w/ your supervisor

Utilize your organization's Employee Wellness & EAP resources

211: Local & national resources

Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988

Harbor Of Grace Law Enforcement & First Responder Wellness Ctr
<https://harborofgracerecovery.com/>
443-502-8606

Recovery Centers of America RESCU
Addiction Recovery for First Responders/Law Enforcement
<https://recoverycentersofamerica.com/substance-abuse-treatment/first-responders/>
1-800-RECOVERY (1-800-732-6837)

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: CHANGE THE TRAJECTORY



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