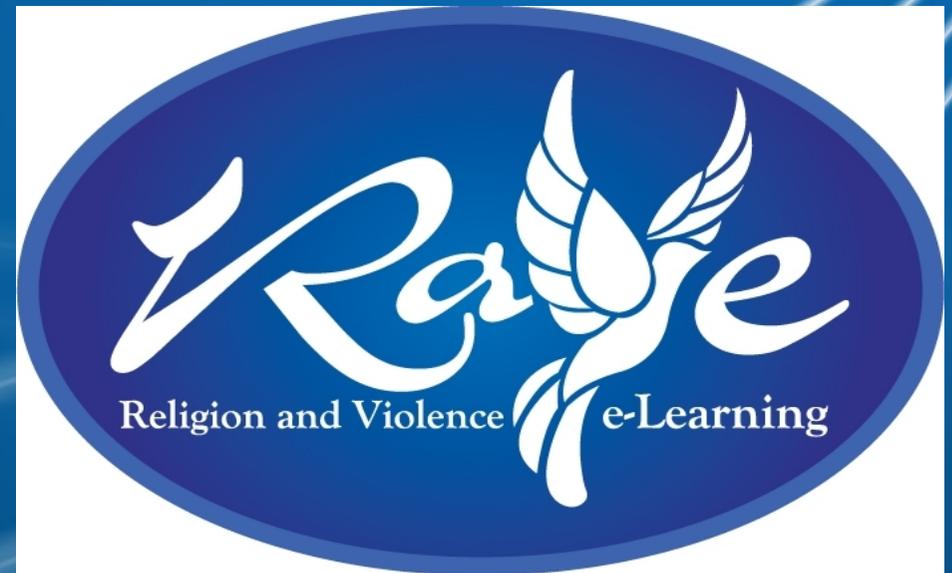


Caring for the Caregiver



Learning objectives

In this lesson we will consider the following issues:

1. Work-related stress
2. Support from agency culture
3. Self-care practices

Work-related stress



While a certain amount of stress is common to all of our lives today, there are times when too much stress becomes physically and emotionally unhealthy.

Work is a primary source of stress in people's lives and there are many sources of stress in the work place.

We will consider the following:

- job factors
- organizational structure
- organizational role
- career development
- relationships

Job factors

There are many factors at work that can lead to unhealthy stress levels:

- workload - being overloaded with responsibilities
- pace - not having enough time to do things well
- variety - repetitive or monotonous nature of the work
- meaning of work - not finding value in one's work
- autonomy - not having the ability to make your own decisions
- hours or shift work - long hours, disruptions in sleep
- physical environment - lots of noise or poor air quality
- isolation - you do all of your work alone
- job insecurity - casual hours, no contract

Organizational structure

Organizational structures can cause work to be stressful:

- participation (or non-participation) in decision-making - particularly the decisions that directly effect your job
- management style - do workers feel like they are under a microscope? Do they feel that management has a heavy-handed approach with employees?
- communication patterns - are expectations on the job clearly communicated? Do workers feel that their contributions and concerns are heard by management?



Organizational role

Problems with organizational roles can be a source of stress:

- role conflict - perhaps a worker has multiple responsibilities and reports to multiple managers
- role ambiguity - the worker does not have a clear idea of what is expected on the job
- level of responsibility - perhaps the workload has grown too large and too much weight has been placed on your shoulders



Career development



Maybe your career development path is the source of your stress:

- under-promotion - maybe you feel that your level of performance at work is under compensated or that there is little room for you to grow
- over-promotion - the opposite can also take place in that a worker feels stress in being given responsibilities for which she is not qualified
- job security - workers fear being laid-off
- overall job satisfaction - you derive little or no meaning from the work you do

Relationships

Interpersonal relationships can also be a source of stress for some people in the workplace.

Stressful relationships can occur between:

- supervisors
- coworkers
- subordinates



Abusive relationships also occur in the workplace and are a source of stress:

- harassment and bullying
- threat of violence
- poisoned workplace

Caregiver stress

Workplace stress also occurs in the anti-violence field.

Shelter workers, abuse counsellors and emergency responders face particular kinds of stress in their work.

Sometimes we refer to this as caregiver stress.



Caregiver stress

Professionals in the anti-violence field face unique challenges as they respond to the traumatic needs of their clients.

Workers become all-too-familiar with the vivid stories of families who have witnessed horrendous acts of abuse.



Hearing these stories is at the core of their daily work experiences.

Individuals who carry the effects of their own survivor experiences are at increased vulnerability to the various trauma that is endemic to first responder work.

Research on caregiver stress



Recent studies find that the nature of working with victims of violence heightened vulnerability to work-related stresses such as burnout (Francis, Loudon & Rutledge, 2004), vicarious trauma (Way *et al* , 2004), and compassionate fatigue (Dunkley & Whalen, 2006).

For many counsellors, advocates and shelter workers, the dedication to their work comes at enormous personal cost.

Burnout

Burnout is a psychological term for the experience of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest.

Anti-violence workers report that the demands of their work include constant multi-tasking and heavy caseloads. The majority find that there is little down time during the work day.



Many workers in the anti-violence field feel the need to continually be "on guard" at work and some are fearful of leaving the building alone after work.

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma describes what happens when a therapist's or a helper's inner experiences are transformed as a result of empathic engagement with survivor clients and their traumatic stories.

Vicarious trauma is the cumulative transformative effect on those in care-giving roles when they work with survivors of violence and abuse.



How agencies can help

It is important that agencies help their anti-violence workers deal with both caregiver stress and vicarious trauma.



Helping anti-violence workers cope with work place stress can happen in a variety of ways:

- responsibilities
- encouragement
- role models
- other considerations

Responsibilities

Time limitations:

- limit time on crisis line and on front desk
- limit the number of hours/shift or days/week

Monitor the number of assigned clients. Things to consider:

- complexity of cases
- degree of trauma
- time needed for administrative tasks
- relief workers for vacation and sick leave



Encouragement

Emphasize the importance of self-care:

- staff meetings
- staff educational opportunities
- tutoring of students
- supervision



Support self-care practices:

- provide space and time
- offer "mental health" days
- ensure use of allotted vacation time
- access to exercise program
- time and money for professional development opportunities
- provide employee assistance programs

Role models

It is important for everyone who works in a care-giver environment to be a role model for healthy relationships and self-care practices. Practice what you preach!

Management and supervisors can monitor their employees well-being. This depends on:

- alertness of supervisor
- open and safe debriefing
- focus on client possibilities and effectiveness

Validate the significance of spirituality:

- acknowledge traditions that enhance well-being and self-care
- allow individuals to access spiritual resources

Other considerations



Re-examine safety practices:

- safety during counselling sessions
- safety leaving the building
- reconsider alternatives to home visits - using office space in client's neighbourhood

Encourage team work:

- break the pattern of isolation
- for smaller agencies, consider pan-agencies
- provide time to discuss issues and concerns
- allot time for socialization

Self-care benefits

According to a 2005 Alberta study conducted by Irene Sevcik and Nancy Nason-Clark, practicing self-care can benefit anti-violence workers in many ways.

Self-care practices help anti-violence workers:

- cope with work stress
- improve relationships with clients and coworkers
- and add to their overall quality of life



Self-care benefits - work stress

Attention to worker self-care allows anti-violence workers recognize changes in how they respond to the work environment.

- They have increase patience with and trust of others.
- They have increased ability to handle the constancy of working with people experiencing multi-layered stress.
- With an increased sense of job-related effectiveness comes a lessening of stress experienced.
- With an increased ability to handle stress comes awareness of positively affecting the workplace environment.

Self-care benefits - clients

Improved self-care leads to improved relationships between anti-violence workers and their clients.



Positive results include:

- an ability to be "present" with clients;
- an awareness of clients attitudes "in the moment;"
- a decreased tendency to try to rescue clients;
- a sense of their own calmness and confidence;
- an openness to clients' trauma;
- an awareness of their own agenda;
- a comfort with the importance of the spiritual;
- a shift in perspective - viewing clients more holistically and moving from the past to the future.

Self-care benefits - coworkers

Relationships with coworkers often improve when self-care practices improve.

Thus, anti-violence workers experience:

- flexibility within collegial relationships;
- ability to "hear" colleagues;
- decreased need to be defensive;
- conflicts being more easily resolved;
- willingness to move away from their own agenda; and
- greater acceptance of differing positions.



Self-care benefits - overall

Anti-violence workers take self-care seriously experience benefits in their lives overall:

- They find healthy ways of dealing with stress as well as handling the stress of working collaboratively.
- They gain a greater sense of personal authenticity and more genuine relationships with others.
- More open communication with colleagues leads to a deepened sense of connectedness.



Conclusion

It is important that work-related stress be addressed.

Agency culture can (and should) support caregivers in addressing their needs.

There are self-care practices that are helpful in reducing caregiver stress.

Centering meditation is an example of one self-care practice which is benefiting caregivers.

