

Identifying & Addressing Vicarious Trauma: Promoting the Sustainability of PCIT Therapists Working in Child Welfare

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Physiological Basics:

1. Eat regularly. Keep a few frozen meals in the break-room freezer in case of late nights at the office, or keep trail mix in your desk drawer.
2. Make healthy food choices (when you can).
3. Exercise for at least 25 minutes at a time; just go for a walk with your dog, your kids, or by yourself.
4. Get medical care when needed. You have sick days—use them!
5. Sleep at least 7 hours per night. As therapists, we know lots of sleep hygiene tips—we deserve to use them!

In-Office Strategies:

1. Decorate your desk. You spend a large portion of your day there. Make your work-space visually pleasant. Choose a color-scheme, or put out a few decorative items. In particular, find a way to make your desk area feel less overwhelming and more inviting to you.
2. Contain loose papers and unfinished items in a way that they can be out of sight at times or enclosed in drawers/files.
3. Limit fluorescent light use (it can cause headaches).
4. Put up pictures of your loved ones or things that make you smile (kids, funny pictures, inspiring quotes).
5. Work less than 10 hours per day.
6. Take a brief break every two hours. Walk through the rest of the office or around the building, refill your water bottle, or listen to a song on your iPod/smartphone.
7. Eat lunch somewhere other than your desk; see if you can eat lunch with someone or while talking on the phone/skyping with loved ones.
8. Leave the building during client cancellations. It will help break up your day, and it's a "bonus hour" to treat yourself to something nice (e.g., get a cup of coffee).
9. Keep personal tea/coffee/hot cocoa supplies at your desk. Invite co-workers to join you for a cup on shared breaks, or simply enjoy the smell.
10. Have a peer support group. This may not always take the shape of a formalized group, and may even look like "social loafing," but colleagues in the office are often in a unique position to empathize with the particular challenges of our work.
11. Shape your job. Identify projects or tasks that are exciting and rewarding, and work with your supervisors to build these tasks into your job. Studies have shown that, over time, employees can actually "shape" their jobs to fit their particular interests/niches.

12. Get additional supervision. If a supervisor is available, seek them out to consult briefly about a challenging case, or just to express yourself after a difficult session.
13. Engage in sensory activities between sessions to promote grounded-ness and mindfulness. Be intentional about using scented lotion between clients, and take your time rubbing it in.

Transition Strategies:

1. Use your car as a transition space between work and home. When you pull in at home, stay in the car for 5 to 10 minutes playing games on your phone, listening to music, or simply being quiet. Do something to distract your mind from work obligations/issues, and mentally review what you expect to find/plan to do upon entering home.
2. Sit quietly for 5 minutes and breathe deeply to create a changed physical state before leaving work, in transit, or when you first get home.
3. Change out of your work clothes as soon as you're home. This helps you "switch" out of your role as a trauma therapist and back into your role as a person!

Relaxation Strategies:

1. Take a long shower or bath. Try using scented bath oils or new bath products, particularly those with notably pleasing scents. Long showers/baths just before sleep also help drive your body temperature down more quickly and help you fall asleep faster.
2. Burn incense or scented candles.
3. Listen to nature sounds or sounds of running water/rain/ocean waves while meditating/deep breathing.
4. Do a full-body scan to increase mindful awareness of tension and sensations in your body.
5. Intentionally relax your muscles. This may take the form of deep stretching as in yoga and pilates, or progressive muscle relaxation.
6. Practice yoga and/or meditation regularly (see mindfulness strategies for more information).
7. Do deep breathing daily to alter your physical state.

Mindfulness Strategies:

1. Make time for regular reflection/meditation. This may look like a daily practice, or it may be less frequent than that. The important thing is that it is regular and effective in reconnecting you to yourself and your experience.
2. Spend time in nature and be intentional about noticing sounds and smells, as well as visual stimuli.
3. Foster a spiritual connection and community.
4. Start practicing mindful meditation. The Mindful Awareness & Research Center at UCLA has numerous guided meditations available for download as mp3s, and

they start as short as just 3 minutes. (available at:
<http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>)

5. Download a mindfulness bell widget on your computer. It will “ding” softly every 30 minutes to remind you to stop whatever you are doing and spend 1 minute in mindful meditation. (for PC users:
<http://www.mindfulnessdc.org/mindfulclock.html> and for Mac users:

Creative/Expressive Strategies:

1. Draw, paint, or write for 5 to 10 minutes at the end of each day to express what you are holding onto.
2. Cook a nice meal. Try something new and exciting or an old classic, but be mindful of the experience of using your hands to prepare the food, and of the taste of the food as you eat.
3. Cook without a recipe. Start with something simple, like chocolate chip cookies. Most people know the approximate ingredients/ratios, and sometimes it can be fun to just “eyeball” the rest. Move on to new combinations when you feel ready or have a new idea!
4. Go to a museum/art exhibit. Here in Sacramento, the Crocker Art Museum is open on weekends and holidays (\$10/ticket, less for children).

Social Strategies:

1. Build your community. Be intentional about developing a network of people with shared beliefs and values, or shared activities. This may take the form of a spiritual community, a parent group, or something else.
2. Make new friends. Over time, mental health professionals often siphon themselves off from those outside the field. Be intentional about making friends and spending time with “non-therapist” people.
3. Join a non-competitive running/walking club or yoga studio. These clubs/studios tend to attract a wide array of people (ages, ethnicities, SES, and occupations), and can help increase the diversity in your social network quickly. Plus, they help you exercise more.

Entertainment Strategies:

1. Follow a television show with your friends, especially competition shows. Take bets on who will win and run a group pool.
2. Read books/literature outside your area of expertise.
3. Try watching “Bringing Home Baby.” This is an entire show about newborn babies who are born to loving parents, and their transition to life together. Seriously, that is the whole show. No child abuse, no violence, no poverty, no endless human struggle. Just happiness. Oh, and babies.
4. Be proactive in finding positive songs. Three of my favorite are “Think Good Thoughts” by Colbie Caillat, “I’m alright” by Sugarland and “Wavin’ Flag” by K’Naan.
5. *Read funny blogs or look at funny pictures on-line (e.g.,

<http://www.damnyouautocorrect.com/> or <http://awkwardfamilyphotos.com/>
or <http://failblog.org/>)

6. *Review these 13 steps to get your through a rough day:

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/13-simple-steps-to-get-you-through-a-rough-day>

*Obviously humor is something subject to personal taste and preference. This list just contains some examples of things that might be funny to some people. Find what works for you!

Organizational Strategies:

1. Encourage your co-workers and supervisees to use their PTO. Preliminary NCTSN studies have shown this is an effective strategy to decrease burnout and workplace stress.
2. Know your job description, and say no to extra responsibilities. As a supervisor, foster an organizational climate where “no” is an acceptable option when asking supervisees to take on extra clients or projects.
3. Celebrate office birthdays or organizational milestones. This fosters a sense of togetherness and can break up monotonous work days.
4. Increase team-building activities. This strengthens the bond between coworkers and increases the felt sense of loyalty to the organization. When workers feel committed to their organization, especially the vision of an organization, they are happier in their jobs and work harder.
5. Implement a buddy self-care program. Therapists are notably better at “taking care” of others than themselves. At one NCTSN site, program heads instituted a system where every employee was assigned a “self-care buddy.” Each person in the pair was responsible to interview their buddy and design a “self-care plan” for their partner. Then, each person was held accountable for making sure their “buddy” completed their plan. Supervisors even ask supervisees about how the supervisees’ buddy is doing with their plan, and how to encourage their buddy to use more self-care strategies!

Hope & Gratitude Strategies:

1. Make a list of positive, hopeful events of the day. Include those things that clients or supervisees did that were signs of growth or progress. Write down a few of these and put them in a file labeled “Hope.” Review the file on your worse days.
2. Keep a file of particularly special letters, cards and notes written to you by friends, family and loved ones. Review them regularly. (My file is titled “you are not pond scum!”)
3. Play a version of “Five Things.” Name 5 things for which you are grateful; identify 5 things you appreciate about yourself; name 5 people who love you (you don't have to stop at 5 here); identify 5 things you've accomplished (today, yesterday, in your life); list 5 things you are looking forward to in the next 7 days.

4. Express your gratitude for coworkers. Tell at least one co-worker each day something they did that you appreciate. This includes administrative staff and volunteers.
5. Reconnect with typically developing and well-loved children. Watch videos of your and your friends' children at birthday parties, playing, etc. Be intentional about reflecting on their innocence and hoping for their future.
6. Track your progress toward goals. If you set realistic goals and track your progress, reviewing your progress can be very encouraging, and inspire gratitude and more hope for the future.

Vicarious Trauma Strategies:

1. Symbolic release. If you have a client about whom you are particularly troubled/worried, this strategy makes concrete the abstract process of letting go. At the end of the day, light a candle to symbolize your client, or each client about whom you are thinking. Say a prayer or express a hope for them, and then blow out the candle. Watch the smoke as it rises up, symbolizing that your prayers/hopes for your client continue on even as you choose to be present in your own life.
2. Guided imagery to distance your client's trauma. If you have a client whose trauma is particularly disturbing to you, especially if it is intruding into your thoughts, this strategy can help exert cognitive control. Imagine you are in a dark room looking at a television. On the television, picture the traumatic event that has been intruding into your thoughts. Notice as the television slowly moves further and further away from you, and it gets smaller. The smaller it gets, the lower the volume and the dimmer the colors. Eventually, you are looking at a small television very far away with snowy static on the screen and no sound. Slowly "turn on the light" in the dark room and re-open your eyes; re-orient to your present location.
3. Mindful hand washing. There are certain difficult sessions that can leave us with a certain "ick" feeling. Sometimes we even feel as though the residue of those difficult moments is still on us. At these times, intentional hand-washing can be helpful in embodying the process of "ridding" oneself of the more persistent negative affects left over from our clients. First, identify the one or two moments in the session that resulted in the most visceral response for you. Review them once, and take a deep breath. Run hot water over your hands and forearms, and lather up; remind yourself that you are choosing to wash those reactions away. As the water and suds go down the drain, pay particular attention to the sensation of warmth in your hands and the gradual release of tension in your arms.