

Naming it, defining it: vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, burnout

There are varying definitions for vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout; distinguishing the differences between them also varies. Some claim that vicarious trauma is used interchangeably with secondary trauma. Others claim that secondary trauma and compassion fatigue are interchangeable. Regardless of the definitions used, a general awareness of these four terms is an important first step in self-care.

Vicarious traumatization: distress from repeated exposure to the trauma experienced by other people

Example: Over the course of two years, a dependency judge has presided over multiple cases of children who were victims of sexual abuse. The judge has read several forensic interviews where children have repeatedly disclosed graphic details of the abuse they endured and has reviewed medical and police reports (with graphic pictures included) further detailing the traumatic events. Additionally, the judge has heard court testimony regarding the specifics of many of these horrific cases. As a result of the continued exposure to traumatizing stories, the judge finds it difficult to concentrate during the day and often “spaces out” while on the bench, has a hard time falling asleep at night, and often ends up having nightmares. The judge’s spouse complains that they never hire a babysitter to go out because the judge doesn’t trust anyone to care for them. The judge can’t find the words to explain all of this; the spouse doesn’t work in a similar profession.

Secondary trauma: when thoughts about the experiences and events heard from the bench intrude in daily life

Example: A judge has heard countless details about a high profile divorce case - a case that has had multiple hearings over a short time period. The case involves alleged domestic violence and graphic details and pictures have been presented in court. In addition, the judge has heard two graphic 911 calls. After the most recent hearing, the judge has recurring nightmares where the wife in the case is screaming and calling for the judge to help.

Compassion fatigue: the cumulative impact of exposure to distressing stories associated with crime, child abuse, neglect, divorce, child support, delinquency, substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence

Example: A judge has dedicated years on the delinquency bench. The judge has heard case after case that includes the cycle of substance abuse relapse resulting in youth being sent to residential programs and appearing over and over in court for repeated offenses. After a period of time, the judge has no energy left to give - at home or at work. The judge avoids phone calls and makes comments that that youth who appear in court have “no hope” of ever changing.

Burnout: exhaustion from prolonged stress

Example: A judge who presides over domestic violence injunctions goes nonstop from the start of the docket until leaving the office at the end of the day. The judge finds it impossible to keep up and handle back-logged cases. When the judge asks the chief judge for help, the chief judge says that there is no money in the budget. When 5:00 hits, the judge can’t wait to run out the door.