

UNDERSTANDING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Recognizing, Preventing, and Addressing Secondary Trauma

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You Can't Take it With You!

Introduction

- Vicarious trauma is the emotional residue from hearing traumatic stories, especially from vulnerable populations like the elderly.
- Lawyers working with elder clients often witness abuse, neglect, exploitation, or isolation.
- Chronic exposure to these stories can lead to emotional and psychological strain.

How Vicarious Trauma Happens

- Repeated exposure to clients' distressing experiences
- Deep empathic engagement with elderly clients
- Lack of time or support to process emotional impact
- A strong sense of responsibility to protect vulnerable clients

Signs & Symptoms

- **Emotional:** Irritability, sadness, helplessness
- **Cognitive:** Difficulty concentrating, cynicism
- **Physical:** Fatigue, headaches, insomnia
- **Behavioral:** Avoidance, reduced productivity, withdrawal
- **Ethical:** Reduced objectivity, over-identification with clients

Risk Factors

- High caseload of trauma-impacted elderly clients
- Exposure to systemic injustice and ageism
- Personal experiences with aging or caregiving
- Lack of trauma-informed legal training
- Limited resources for mental health or support

Impact on Legal Professionals

- Increased risk of burnout
- Emotional detachment or over-involvement
- Impaired decision-making or advocacy
- Decreased job satisfaction and higher turnover

Prevention Strategies

- Establish healthy emotional boundaries with clients
- Engage in regular self-reflection and supervision
- Develop a network of supportive colleagues
- Take time for restorative activities (exercise, hobbies)
- Advocate for manageable workloads and support systems
- Box breathing\mindfulness

Organizational Support

- Train staff in trauma-informed legal practice
- Normalize mental health discussions in legal settings
- Create space for peer support and debriefing
- Provide access to wellness programs and EAPs

Coping & Recovery

- Seek professional counseling or therapy
- Participate in peer support groups for elder law professionals
- Practice mindfulness and stress-reduction techniques
- Reconnect with your values and purpose in your legal work

Ethical Considerations

- Vicarious trauma can influence ethical decision-making
- Ensure decisions prioritize client autonomy and dignity
- Recognize when trauma is affecting your judgment

Conclusion

- Vicarious trauma is a serious occupational hazard for trusts & estates and elder law attorneys
- Prioritize emotional well-being alongside professional excellence
- Build a trauma-informed, supportive legal culture

Q&A

- Questions and Discussion

Contact Information

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Resources

- "Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others" by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky
- National Center on Elder Abuse: <https://ncea.acl.gov/>
- ABA Commission on Law and Aging:
https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_aging/
- Mental health apps: Headspace, Calm, Insight Timer