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Don't ignore work-imposed stress

As divorce attorneys, we deal with emotion and trauma on a daily basis. The trauma may be relational, financial or physical. It is an attorney's job to navigate their clients through the legal system. In doing so, we are at risk of becoming overwhelmed ourselves.

Tara Thomason, a psychotherapist with a juris doctorate degree, explained that people who are most affected by compassion fatigue are individuals who encounter human suffering and trauma in their work, particularly those professionals who regularly provide empathic or compassionate responses and interventions.

According to Thomason, "Human beings have a finite ability to provide empathy and compassion for others who are distressed or suffering." This threshold serves a protective function, keeping us from becoming overwhelmed.

When professionals are tasked with responding to human suffering day after day, and do not take active steps to protect themselves from the impact of secondary stress, their resources can become depleted and they may feel a reduced capacity for compassion.

If this happens, Thomason said, it "doesn't mean you are an uncaring person or that you are bad at your job. You are simply human." In fact, professionals who are most susceptible to compassion fatigue are often those who are best at identifying, understanding and providing for the needs of their clients.

The most important thing we can do for ourselves is to become educated around the effects of secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue.

Thomason explained that

these experiences are part of the job. We are often required to be come emotionally available, and thus vulnerable, to understand and respond to our clients' experiences.

When working within the context of human suffering on a daily basis, attorneys can feel isolated and overwhelmed. It is crucial for attorneys to be able to identify what they are feeling, understand why they are feeling it and learn how to take preventative steps to reduce the stress created by secondary trauma.

Prevention is key

It is important to be aware of available preventive measures. Thomason said professionals are often encouraged to practice self-care.

However, self-care can be a somewhat generic term, and while yoga, meditation, physical exercise, vacations and healthy eating will positively contribute to overall well-being, these practices may not be enough to address vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue.

Thomason explained the best thing we can do to combat compassion fatigue is to "find a safe space where we can share our thoughts, feelings and experiences with another person who can help to validate, regulate and contain potentially overwhelming affects." Basically, we have to talk about our work and we have to talk to people who can provide us with a compassionate response.

Therapy is often the best outlet. While many people talk to their co-workers, this can create a domino effect. Often, our co-workers are managing similar, if not the same, professional experiences.

While this is helpful, it also places a burden on them to extend themselves even further. As a third-party who is removed

COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



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from our daily professional, social and family lives, a therapist can provide an unbiased, confidential and nonjudgmental space for working through the highly charged emotional material we take in as a part of our work.

Another important preventive measure is willingness to set boundaries. Many professionals struggle setting boundaries out of fear of disappointing clients and co-workers, appearing unavailable or seeming incompetent, Thomason explained.

She pointed out, "Even if we have the competence and ability to do more, it may not be the best choice at all times." It is important to ask ourselves before we take that extra meeting, or agree to that extra client, "At what cost?"

Signs and symptoms

The American Counseling Association explains compassion fatigue, or vicarious trauma, is easily confused with burnout. "Burnout is generally something that happens over time. As it builds, perhaps a change, such as time off or a new and sometimes a different job could help." Compassion fatigue is "a state of tension and preoccupation of the stories [or] trauma experienced by clients."

Thomason explained some signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue are the following:

- Problems in personal relationships.
- Inability to hear and attend to client's problems, when we previously were able to.
- Reluctance to take care of ourselves, including going to work when we are sick or not taking vacation.
- Decreased compassion toward co-workers, for example, resenting co-workers who do take care of themselves or set appropriate boundaries.
- Psychological and behavioral symptoms such as anxiety, depression, having a short fuse or feelings of isolation.

Other symptoms laid out by the American Counseling Association:

- Free floating anger or irritation.
- Startle effect or being jumpy.
- Overeating or not eating enough.
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep.
- Losing sleep over client problems.

Professionals in health care and mental health tend to acknowledge secondary stress, vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue as very real results of the work they do.

It is imperative that we, as attorneys, educate ourselves, take preventive measures and watch for symptoms and warning signs so we can continue helping clients navigate the legal system with strength and compassion.

To continue your compassion fatigue education, take a look at the novel "Trauma Stewardship" by Laura van Dernoon Lipsky with Connie Burk.

The author would like to acknowledge the substantial contribution to this column by law clerk Adeline Sulentic.