

Occupational Stressors (Part 1): Understanding Experiences of Occupational Stressors

Background

While research about and implementation of trauma-sensitive programs and approaches increases in schools, attention also needs to be paid to the experiences and wellbeing of educators. The evolution of understandings of trauma have led to an increased awareness that people live with experiences of trauma in many different ways. It is now known that this trauma exists in the general population. This knowledge comes with a responsibility to understand trauma in school landscapes not only from students' perspectives but also from the lives of educators. Educators living with trauma, educators working with students living with trauma, and educators living with trauma and working with students living with trauma, can each experience increased rates of burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary/vicarious trauma, and vicarious trauma. While often these terms can be, and are, used interchangeably, it is important to understand their unique attributes and characteristics.

Living With Trauma

The commonly accepted statistic is that, at minimum, 25% of children come to schools having experienced some kind of Adverse Childhood Experience. If this is true for the children and youth who come through the doors, at the very least, it offers a pause to acknowledge that some teachers coming into schools are also living with trauma. In the midst of COVID-19, educators were living the shared experience of the pandemic, and then, as schools were reopened were also trying to navigate the tensions of personal and familial health. This included enforcing health mandates, "fixing" the "problem" of learning loss, all the while, for many, having the added fear of being a vector of transmission to their own families. For many, this time led to heightened exhaustion, increases in stress, and decreases in job satisfaction. Navigating the shared experiences of COVID also draws attention to other possible intersections where students' experiences may draw out or 'trigger' an educator's experiences. Understanding the presence of these possible interconnections of experience is a critical aspect of shaping a trauma-sensitive school for all.

Burnout

Burnout is often a condition experienced by educators who have become exhausted from the expected occupational stressors of their job. These stressors may include long hours, poor working relationships, and hostility from students, colleagues, and/or other stakeholders. While burnout can hinder educators' job satisfaction, engagement, and performance, it does not necessarily result in a loss of compassion for those with whom an educator works. Left unattended, however, burnout can be compounded by guilt when an educator feels they are not living up to their own standards.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue refers to the empathic strain, exhaustion, emotional erosion, and physical wear that can develop over time when those in helping professions are unable to counterbalance their exposure with ways that support them to refuel/ regenerate. It has been called the “cost of caring” for others who are themselves in emotional distress. For example, educators may find that they have become preoccupied and de-energized with the difficult and troublesome issues faced by their students; this would be characterized as compassion fatigue.

Over time, however, if these instances of “helplessness” begin to affect their worldviews and beliefs about the extent to which, they as educators, can impact change in students' lives, this would characterize itself as vicarious/secondary trauma.

Vicarious/Secondary Trauma

British Columbia's Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council (2013) posits, “when it comes to experiences of trauma, the distinction between practitioner (or anyone providing some level of support or service) and those accessing care can become blurred. Vicarious trauma can sometimes be misinterpreted as burnout. However, there is a distinction. Burnout is tied to the expected occupational duties that may stress educators whereas vicarious trauma may stem from responsibilities outside of regularly expected duties, such as working alongside children and/or colleagues who have experienced trauma. Repeated exposure to trauma and/or disclosures shared by students can lead to the educator embodying that trauma and displaying symptoms (such as PTSD) for something they did not experience themselves. Vicarious trauma is shaped by an individual's internalizing of the emotional experiences of others. Vicarious trauma can result in a variety of negative health effects for educators.

Easy Identification of Each Response

Burnout:

Stressor incurred from the regularly expected duties and associated events of one's job (ex: long hours)

Compassion Fatigue:

Stressors incurred from ongoing work that is outside of one's regularly expected duties, such as empathetic engagement with students in their classroom

Vicarious/Secondary Trauma:

Stress incurred from experiencing trauma through the empathetic interaction with children/youth who are living with trauma

Are Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma Inevitable?

Vicarious trauma occurs due to repeated exposure to others' traumas. However, vicarious trauma is not inevitable no matter how much trauma exposure someone may experience. For some, depending on a myriad of variables such as healthy relationships, attachment, physical and mental health supports, etc, supporting students offers a sense of continual purpose from which they derive energy. Thus, educators should not be encouraged to minimize interactions with students living with trauma, but to rather continuously practice self-reflection to know to what extent they can handle exposures to secondary trauma before the time comes.

As well, with this information educators will be able to identify the experiences of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious/secondary trauma within themselves and their colleagues. For more information on navigating these stressors please see our brief entitled *Mitigating Occupational Stressors in Education*.

For all references and more information please see the full report