Burnout and vicarious trauma are both phenomena staff are exposed to on an ongoing basis as more inmates come into the correctional system with high risks/high needs. Often, staff with training needs and high expectations for change work with inmates who expose them to discussions about significant abuse, trauma and other stressful issues. In addition, staff in the institutions often observe very upsetting situations, such as inmates overdosing or withdrawing from serious addiction. This adds more stress to staff, and over time, it can lead to burnout and difficulty adjusting.

Burnout for staff is defined as experiencing three elements: 1) emotional exhaustion, 2) depersonalization and 3) reduced personal efficacy. Staff often experience emotional exhaustion by feeling depleted, over-extended and fatigued as the result of the pressures of the job, monotony and repetition. Depersonalization is a cynicism that develops in the attitude toward one’s work and the inmates in general. Finally, reduced personal efficacy is viewed as a negative self-evaluation of one’s accomplishments or overall job effectiveness. Burnout often creeps up on staff, and they may not be aware of their stress levels or know how to pull themselves out of their disenchantment with their job.

Vicarious trauma defined as a “transformation in self that a trauma worker or helper experiences from empathetic engagement with traumatized clients and their reports of traumatic experiences; its hallmark is disrupted spirituality, or disruption in the trauma worker’s perceived meaning and hope.”

With higher-risk/higher need clients being found in the system, the frequency and severity of engagement with trauma has become a daily experience for many correctional staff. They hear about and witness many dysfunctional, painful relationships, and often, inmates’ stories are full of vivid recollections of trauma and pain. They also experience clients that can be depressed and suicidal and have a hard time hanging on to meaning and hope. This stress can be easily transferred to the staff. Staff are not immune to the traumatic experiences they hear and see.

Both burnout and vicarious trauma are not separate phenomena but overlap; being exposed to trauma can lead correctional staff toward burnout. Feeling the symptoms of burnout can make one more susceptible to vicarious trauma. This synergy makes it imperative that correctional staff take care of themselves and are educated and aware of symptoms as they emerge. Staff should be equipped with ideas of how to respond to these negative symptoms with self-care.
Managing staff burnout and vicarious trauma in the workplace

Need for balance in corrections

The corrections professional clearly works in a profession that is demanding, challenging, rewarding and one where there is a learning curve. Part of that learning curve is being aware of self and healthy limits. Corrections professionals need to understand what balance looks like. They need to learn as they go, so they are not as easily susceptible to burnout and trauma.

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One such demand for balance is personal life vs. professional life. It is extremely important that corrections professionals do not take their stresses and frustrations home and that there is a separation between their professional experience and overall satisfaction with their life outside of work. When personal and professional life gets blurred, it can create problems for the corrections professional.

A second area of demand for balance is between financial pressures and limits on pay. Corrections is a great profession to grow and learn, however, salaries are often not exorbitant. Staff need to learn to balance paying their bills and carefully budgeting their money. Financial pressures can lead to a lot of stress for staff that are not wise with their money. Area for balance is learning paperwork demands versus spending time with inmates. Literature states there has to be a higher intensity of treatment and face to face contact with clients who have high risk/high need. This can be difficult to do at times, as staff can find themselves pulled between paperwork demands and interacting with inmates in programmatic ways.

A fourth area for balance in this field has to do with the nature of staff. Often, professionals get into corrections because they are “givers.” They want to give and help others. They need to learn that they also need to “take,” especially outside of work. A healthy balance between giving and taking is necessary so that one does not lose oneself in the work.3

A fifth area to find balance lies between trying to solve difficult client issues alone or consulting with another staff when one is overwhelmed with a client. It is important to realize it is easy to not have all the answers, but it is important to have a network of professionals and mentors that one can seek and work with when demands get difficult.

A sixth area to find balance is occasionally realizing that one may need counseling from a professional if going through an extremely difficult time with one’s professional or personal life. The counseling process can be viewed as a healthy outlet rather than an admission of personal weakness.

Some examples and ideas for creating balance as a corrections professional is knowing when to take time off for self and finding contentment outside the job. Also, balance is found in maturing in one’s role and learning to “work smarter, not harder” in processing one’s mistakes and learning not to take clients’ behaviors personally. This maturation can develop as one learns to handle the pressures of the job and still be productive. Often, mentors and professional role models can help professionals grow into their positions. Finally, hobbies and well-planned vacations can be areas for balance so that one does not get lost in the work. This can be seen as an insurance policy taken out against vicarious trauma and burnout.

Common symptoms of burnout

Burnout is a common phenomenon: An estimated 21–67 percent of mental health workers experience high levels of burnout.4 When you consider the cost of recruiting and training new staff, burnout is costly to agencies. Burnout can often creep up on the correctional workers who experience crises on the unit and have to deal closely with negative feelings from and toward inmates.

Burnout may start with reduced efficiency and energy. The person feels drained, as if they are depressed, and often feel fatigued with the normal routine of the day. This fatigue can also lead to lower levels of motivation. The correctional worker starts coming to work late or forgetting about important job duties. Other employees and inmates may notice the lower level of motivation. The correctional worker may start making errors in paperwork, scheduling and not communicating basic
Burnout and trauma

Burnout may affect the emotional makeup of the correctional staff, where they start becoming irritable over small matters. Their irritability may overflow onto inmates and fellow staff. It is common for frustration to mount for the burned-out staff, and they can easily blame others and become overly anxious. As their frustration mounts, they can easily start becoming suspicious of others and question motives. Unfortunately, when a staff member is burned out, the individual often fails to have insight or awareness of what is happening to self, as if the person is wearing blinders; it is easier to blame others.

Finally, burnout can become a loss of hope, of feeling things will never improve, and of wondering why to even stay at the job. It is crucial for one to see the benefits of their position and the need to accept help.

**Burnout: The elephant in the room**

Very often, the “elephant in the room” does not get discussed, although it is fairly common. There seems to be shame attached to burnout. Burned-out correctional employees can start feeling they are “bad” or that they did something wrong. It may be more beneficial to view burnout as a physical illness, much like the flu or a cold, which takes care and time to heal. It does not mean the worker has chosen the wrong career or field, it just means they may need some change to find a path toward resolution.

It is important for managers and supervisors to recognize burnout and to help their employees set up a path to address the condition. Recognition is always the beginning of healing. Managers and supervisors are in a key position to address the issue; they stand to benefit by avoiding needless turnover or loss of employees. It also builds teamwork and trust when the burned-out employees realize somebody understands and can help address the issue. Research supports that burnout will stay stable across time if untreated — about 40 percent of individuals stay at the same stage of burnout, 30 percent get worse and 30 percent become less burned out. Thus, 70 percent continue to struggle. The corrections field cannot afford to lose good staff due to burnout.

**Costs of burnout**

To any organization, there are many costs attached, such as the cost of training new staff, discipline hearings or grievances on situations that could have been avoided, and an organization’s loss when the morale of employees are affected. Costs to the organization include benefits that get tapped, such as sick time, overtime, health insurance premiums and disability claims. Burnout can lead to costly outlays for an organization, not to mention the emotional expense due to the impact on inmates, the burned-out worker and the families. The cost to the employee relates to a deterioration of their physical and emotional health, financial cost of using a lot of their benefits, the cost of lost productivity, and poor self-esteem. A burned-out employee said it well: “I felt like I was in quicksand and could not make my way out.” It is easy, when an employee experiences burnout, to blame everything outside of the real problem.

The cost to the clients is enormous, as their program effectiveness can be compromised due to the negative environment. It is nearly impossible for the burned-out employee to be a good role model. Being burned out easily takes focus off of the inmates that need focused attention. This can create an environment where the inmate can also start feeling negative and react to the staff going through burnout. It also makes it easier for inmates to play manipulative games when they see the employee with burnout as the weak link to capitalize.

**Addressing burnout**

As Benjamin Franklin once said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” It is best to become aware of burnout at the early stages so it can be addressed. This may not always be possible. From an employee’s standpoint, recovering from burnout can take an average of six to nine months if the employee addresses the problem and starts feeling better. It will still take a lot of patience and encouragement by supervisors and the team supporting the employee. In extreme cases, the employee may need to go through some individual or group counseling outside the workplace. The employee will need to address burnout by paying attention to their self-care, such as getting into healthier eating and sleeping habits as well as minimizing their alcohol and caffeine intake. Often, self-care solutions are simple to see, but difficult to implement when one feels down. The employee going through burnout also may need to change their immediate environment to create some peaceful spaces for themselves where they do not feel vulnerable. The spaces can be created outside of work, such
as engaging in a hobby that gives them relief, exercising outside of the house, or merely doing nice things for oneself.

It is important for the employee to start celebrating small steps of accomplishment on the job and to help themselves by taking assigned breaks and resisting working overtime. It takes a concentrated effort to change how one thinks about work to help heal from burnout.

Finally, as an individual employee, it is important to improve relationships on the job and outside of the job. This means embracing supportive people in one’s life and maybe saying “no” to others who may be more toxic to the person trying to recover. It is important to avoid disturbing media and reach out to people who are supportive and with whom one can easily talk about feelings. The worst thing to do is hang out with people who do not understand or who put more pressure on the employee.

Research supports that there are many things organizations can do to help prevent and deal with burnout in employees: It is important for managers in organizations to reduce employee work overload. This can happen through strategic work with goals for units and implementing priorities.8

Organizations can reduce role ambiguity and conflict by developing clear and accurate job descriptions so that employees know what is expected and are provided with necessary training at key times.9 Too often, when workloads get high, losing track of priorities happens; it is important to refocus employees so they do not feel so overwhelmed. It is important to increase positive feedback and to implement a reward system so employees feel gratitude. This will help stave off burnout.10 It is extremely important for supervisors to let employees know they are appreciated and to make sure they find out from the employee what they are getting out of their job. Supervision is a great place to ask these questions of employees, especially since one of the key reasons people leave jobs is due to their immediate supervisor.

It is important to increase employee involvement relevant to decision making and problem solving. It is important to enforce reasonable work hours and to discourage employees from overdoing, as this feeds burnout. A good way of doing this is to respect and increase teamwork. Teams can share the workload and be support people for each other.

It is important, as an organization, to provide the worker with physical outlets and activities throughout the day. It might be possible to have breaks to allow employees to refocus and relieve stress. Some employees provide workers with the opportunity to exercise during the day, such as gym memberships, to give them a way to get away during breaks to relieve stress.

Vicarious trauma: Invitation to stress

Trauma affects individuals in different ways, depending on personality and how well individuals are coping with immediate stressors. No two employees are going to respond in the same manner. As part of the formula, it is important to realize the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition”11 now identifies vicarious trauma as a potential trigger for post-traumatic stress disorder. The individual no longer has to be directly exposed to a trauma. PTSD symptoms include the following:

– Intrusive symptoms such as nightmares, feelings and bad memories.
– Avoidance of the things related to the trauma experienced or discussed.
– Negative changes in thought or mood as a result of the trauma.
– Changes in arousal, such as startling, aggressive behavior, or sleep disturbance.

Often those with PTSD symptoms will need some counseling or some direct work in how to understand and how to cope with people, places and things associated with the trauma. Once again, it is important for supervisors to understand the stress levels of their employees and to be good observers so they recognize when the stress is becoming overwhelming for each employee. Questions managers could ask are as follows:

– Is there a better way to distribute high trauma cases among their employees?
– Are some workers better suited for trauma cases?
– How can education and outreach be promoted to help staff deal with the vicarious trauma they are experiencing?

Signs of stress for the employee are emotional, physical and behavioral. Emotional signs of stress can be anger, sadness, tuning out and/or feeling less safe in their world. Behavioral signs are the employee isolating, avoiding, staying at work longer than usual, not being able to separate personal life from work life, and/or possibly undertaking risky behaviors. Physical symptoms can be headaches, anxiety, sweats, hives and/or rashes. Managers and supervisors need to take note of all these signs and address issues before they become significant problems.
Research on vicarious trauma

The individual employee can help protect themselves from stress by being good observers of their own behaviors. Being aware of their own signs of stress can help employees strategize ways to adjust their jobs, such as taking breaks, asking for help, and going to their supervisor when they feel overwhelmed. Planning ahead is one of the best ways for employees not to become overwhelmed by vicarious trauma. Workers need to evaluate themselves daily and weekly to see how they are coping with the traumatic situations in which they are exposed and to reach out to other employees to share the load. Trauma-informed care is always helpful for all staff in learning approaches and strategies that work best to alleviate stress as well as the best ways to approach inmates who have many trauma issues. Finally, it is important for the employee to demonstrate effective self-care outside the workplace to alleviate stress and have a more balanced life. Too often, employees who let their stress mount have unhappy lives outside the job, which increases feelings of anxiety and hopelessness.

An organizational approach that helps the employee prevent vicarious trauma is diversifying one’s caseload of high-trauma inmates and strategically assigning inmates with the highest level of trauma to the most professionally mature workers. It is also important to train staff about stress and trauma during orientation. Trauma work is long-term and multitalked. Progress can be slow at times, and answers for traumatized inmates may be slow in coming. Having this mindset can take some of the burden off staff and help them form realistic expectations. Finally, as part of caseloads, it is important to use adjunct services outside the organization whenever possible, such as self-help groups, outpatient services and other ancillary supports. These ancillary supports take stress directly off correctional staff and give the inmate ways to leave the living area and have a more balanced life.

Whenever possible, it is also important to better plan the work environment to be peaceful and nonthreatening. The colors of the walls, pictures and other environmental components can impact how staff and inmates feel. It is also important for staff and inmates to feel safe through safety and security procedures. At times, answers can be very simple, such as having a break room separate from the inmates, allowing soft music, or other environmental changes that send a peaceful, safe message.

It is important in organizational practice to have educational moments for employees in which they are able to obtain a better understanding of how to handle clients who have trauma issues. These specific trainings should be offered on a mandatory, ongoing basis. It is also important to send workers to outside conferences so they can network with other colleagues. This reduces isolation and helps workers see they are not the only ones experiencing issues with trauma.

Finally, supervision is an important avenue to protect against vicarious trauma. The supervisor can have meetings that normalize trauma as part of the work experience. Supervisors can teach employees in a thoughtful, respectful way the effects of vicarious trauma and how to protect themselves. It is important for supervisors to separate the evaluation process from the educational process so the worker does not feel judged in bringing stressful topics up in supervision. Finally, supervisors can make counseling and support services available to staff who are dealing with high trauma loads. This helps to plan ahead for the impact of the trauma.

Practice debriefing

Another practice is to hold an organizational debrief after a traumatic event happens. A significant proportion of health care workers will experience some degree of critical incident stress following adverse events. It helps to give all employees who experience a traumatic event an opportunity to share feelings, thoughts and consequences related to the event. The debrief session(s) should not be held during work time and should be in a safe place. The debrief session should be led by somebody who has counseling credentials to help all employees involved to process the event. There is no formally recognized, routine debriefing option available to support health care staff.

Debriefing is key in that correctional workers are increasingly being...
exposed to the deaths of clients, which can produce particularly troublesome memories. In corrections, staff can witness overdoses and withdrawal on living units from drugs, such as heroin, K2 and bath salts. Also, many inmates have had sexual, physical and emotional abuse in their past and present, which need to be discussed and can easily impact the workers’ emotional well-being. The workers hear sad stories about clients’ children and abuse situations. Finally, a lot of the inmates have physical pain and depression. Correctional staff are not counselors, but they often have to respond to clients who are in severe physical and emotional pain and may want to give up or may think no one cares. The intensity of these experiences makes it paramount to debrief and educate in response to highly charged emotional situations.

The key issues regarding vicarious trauma and burnout often overlap in the workplace, making education and self-reflection important for correctional workers. As every worker is unique and will respond differently to loss and stress, it is important that organizations have educational and support services available for employees. It is key for supervisors to be proactive and look for ways to support their employees. Supervisors need to help their employees be aware of the phenomena of burnout and how vicarious trauma can impact them. Burnout and vicarious trauma should not stigmatize the employee. Rather, it should be normalized, and appropriate educational and counseling programs need to be available. It is important that in the process of getting employees help, their privacy is respected and confidentiality is enforced. It is important for employees to be listened to and encouraged to express feelings around grief, loss and trauma. The process of being listened to can help one feel much better and much less isolated.

These issues have become growing issues for corrections and will need to be addressed thoughtfully at the employee and organizational level so that corrections does not lose good workers. These experiences can become part of the learning process and improve professional skills.

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Endnotes on p. 90