

”We are not
robots”

Job-related stress - and how to
survive

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”I’ll never forget this case”

- ▶ Brutal murder of a teenager in 2020 in Finland
- ▶ Those who committed the crime were also adolescent
- ▶ Investigator in charge, detective inspector M.Forss tells:
- ▶ *”This case is unique. When you look at the photos and videos, and investigate the case, it really goes under your skin. But the worst part is seeing the pain of the relatives of the victim. ... ”However, you must see this as a job. Still, it hurts. We are not robots, after all”.*

Secondary traumatic stress as "emotional infection"

- ▶ When we are exposed in our job to "unique cases" day after day, we may "get infected" - "emotional infection" or "infectious trauma"
- ▶ Significant concern for law enforcement administrators and people who work in trauma-filled situations (e.g. in the criminal justice system)
- ▶ Secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatization and compassion fatigue
- ▶ Secondary traumatic stress is a result of indirect exposure to traumatic incident or material (clients stories, pre-trial investigation records etc)

Red flag - symptoms of secondary traumatic stress

- ▶ Symptoms often the same that people experience after primary trauma
- ▶ A variety of different symptoms, sometimes difficult to recognize
- ▶ Work product begins to slip, sick leaves for various reasons
- ▶ Feelings of guilt and hopelessness, self-doubt, irritability, hypervigilance, social withdrawal, cynical attitude towards clients, professional cynicism, sleep disorders, nightmares, fears, difficulties of concentration, depression, substance use, experiencing work as a heavy burden
- ▶ Continuous exposure to human suffering may change the way we see our environment - loss of confidence that good is still possible in the world

Bulletproof - or not?

- ▶ The attitude in many criminal justice systems - "just suck it up and move to a next case"
- ▶ We are trained to be strong and independent
- ▶ "This doesn't concern me"
- ▶ Difficult to seek and accept help or even admit own vulnerability
- ▶ We all have a breaking point - hearing clients difficult stories and being exposed to traumatic material all the time can make us sick

Understanding stress

- ▶ Defining stress is difficult, it is different for each of us (different interpretations and evaluations) - our brain determines what is threatening
- ▶ Stress can be useful - it is an adaptive response (good stress - bad stress)
- ▶ When we are in a real danger, our body is ready for anything (fight or flight) - we are also able to get out from a dangerous situation quickly
- ▶ This life-preserving stress reaction is automatic and fast
- ▶ When physical dangers are replaced by **psychological stress triggers**, our body still reacts as if we were in real danger

Understanding stress: just relax - or still in danger?

- ▶ If we manage to solve the threatening event (e.g. fight against the sable-toothed tiger), we can take a deep breath and just relax
- ▶ "The brake" of our nervous system calms the stress reaction down
- ▶ What happens if we can't solve the problem and our brain evaluates the situation threatening?
- ▶ How does our body react if the situation is **perceived** dangerous all the time?
- ▶ Long-term exposure to multiple stressors can harm our health and well-being
- ▶ Chronic stress, toxic stress, burnout, secondary traumatic stress

How to mitigate the negative effect of job-related stress?

- ▶ Identify your stressors, recognize trauma symptoms
- ▶ Learn to use positive coping strategies and boost your resilience
- ▶ Set emotional boundaries, keep proper professional distance
- ▶ If possible, limit your caseload - avoid workaholism
- ▶ Have time for leisure, cultivate well-being
- ▶ Peer support, collegial supervision, programs for self care, mindfulness etc.
- ▶ Professional Quality of Life Scale (The ProQOL)

Soothing your nervous system during your workday

- ▶ **Before** a difficult case - take a deep breath or two
- ▶ **After** a challenging meeting - Develop good practices suitable for you (go for a walk, listen to music, shake your body etc.)
- ▶ Learn to be mindful and present
- ▶ Identify, tolerate and regulate your own emotions
- ▶ Use peer support, share your heavy load with a coworker
- ▶ Tips for soothing your nervous system **during** a meeting:
 - ▶ Sit up straight, hold your chin up
 - ▶ Feel your feet in the floor
 - ▶ Move around a little in your chair
 - ▶ Take a deep breath, relax your muscles
 - ▶ Swallow intentionally a few times
 - ▶ Message to your nervous system - "all clear, no worries"

How about self compassion?

- ▶ Sometimes we judge ourselves and make unreasonable demands on ourselves
- ▶ What if we offered kindness to ourselves instead?
- ▶ How about a bit of self compassion every now and then?

- ▶ Take a deep breath. Pay attention how things are right now. You can silently repeat the following phrases in your mind:
 - ▶ *May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be well.*

- ▶ Take good care of yourself. Remember, we are not robots after all!