



PREVENTING STAFF BURNOUT TO HELP SURVIVORS HEAL

Creating adequate and effective space for healing is challenging while providing direct service. Most advocates have heard the terms “vicarious trauma” and “burnout” before, and many have also been informed that vicarious trauma can eventually lead to burnout. Vicarious trauma is defined as: a negative reaction to trauma exposure and includes a range of psychosocial symptoms.ⁱ Burnout is defined as: a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity.ⁱⁱ But what does all of that actually look like?

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- ★ Have you ever felt a sense of dread when getting ready for or walking into work?
- ★ Do you ever find yourself thinking about a survivor’s story or the events of a work day in your off time?
- ★ Do you find yourself wanting to sleep all day, or unable to sleep at all?
- ★ Do you ever feel like you cannot log off of email, turn off your phone, or close your office door?
- ★ Have you ever felt like keeping your door closed throughout part or all of the workday, even though there might have been things that needed to get done outside of your office?

Answering yes to some or all of these questions does not mean that you are doing anything wrong. Answering yes may mean that some stronger boundaries with your work might be needed to reduce burnout and stress. This might seem impossible in a field where 24/7 services are available. However, here are some ways to set aside some time to recharge and address some of the effects of vicarious trauma.



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CONSIDER SOME OF THE FOLLOWING WHEN WORKING THROUGHOUT THE DAY:

- ★ Create a time in the day, that is known to all, where you can set aside a few minutes to collect your thoughts and step away from work. This should be outside of your scheduled lunch break.
- ★ Try to take your lunch break away from your desk, or in a space that allows time for you to disconnect from work—even if it's for only a brief time.
- ★ If a survivor shares details of a traumatic incident, it is okay to take time away to decompress. It is challenging to hear the traumatic details of someone's abuse, and continue working through the day without giving yourself time to process. Check-in with a supervisor if you feel that the details that you've heard need to be processed with them or on your own.
- ★ Check in with supervisors regarding your need to take time off. It is important to acknowledge that we all need time away from work and time that is off the clock.
 - It is also important to not check emails while on a day off. However, if you must check emails due to the agency structure, set time limits throughout the day to check those emails.
- ★ It is okay to schedule times to address matters with other staff and survivors.
 - We acknowledge that teamwork and helping survivors is central to all advocates. However, sometimes requests for help come at times that can be inconvenient, and can interrupt workflow or scheduled time-off. There might be times where something seems urgent, and it may end up being something that can wait for a more convenient time for you. It is okay to tell someone “this is not a good time for me, but how is tomorrow?”
 - Of course, if there is an urgent matter, there may not be a time to reschedule. It's good practice to respond when the situation is urgent and not when it's only perceived as urgent.
- ★ Talk with your supervisor and walk through some options that will work best for you. Whether that is taking time off, shifting workload, using a company sponsored Employee-Assistance Program, group/individual reflective supervision, or whatever else you decide would be most helpful for you.



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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- ★ For more information on helping survivors heal, please review the **Healing from Trauma for Survivors Living with HIV** resource in the [Positively Safe Toolkit](#).
- ★ For more information on discussing domestic violence and HIV/AIDS, please review the [HIV/AIDS](#) and [DV Conversation Guides](#) in the [Positively Safety Toolkit](#).

ⁱ <https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/what-is-vicarious-trauma>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>