

The role of supervision in refugee trauma counsellor's experience of vicarious trauma and vicarious growth.

**Working with trauma survivors changes us.
What do clinical supervisors see, think and do
about this?**

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Vicarious trauma

Trauma work has a personal impact that can affect the trauma counsellor's perceptions of themselves, their relationships with others and their view of the world.

Some can have PTSD-like symptoms as well as the "inner disruption" as above.

About 20 years worth of research about vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress.

Vicarious post traumatic growth

Satisfaction: sense of fulfilment, purpose or pleasure

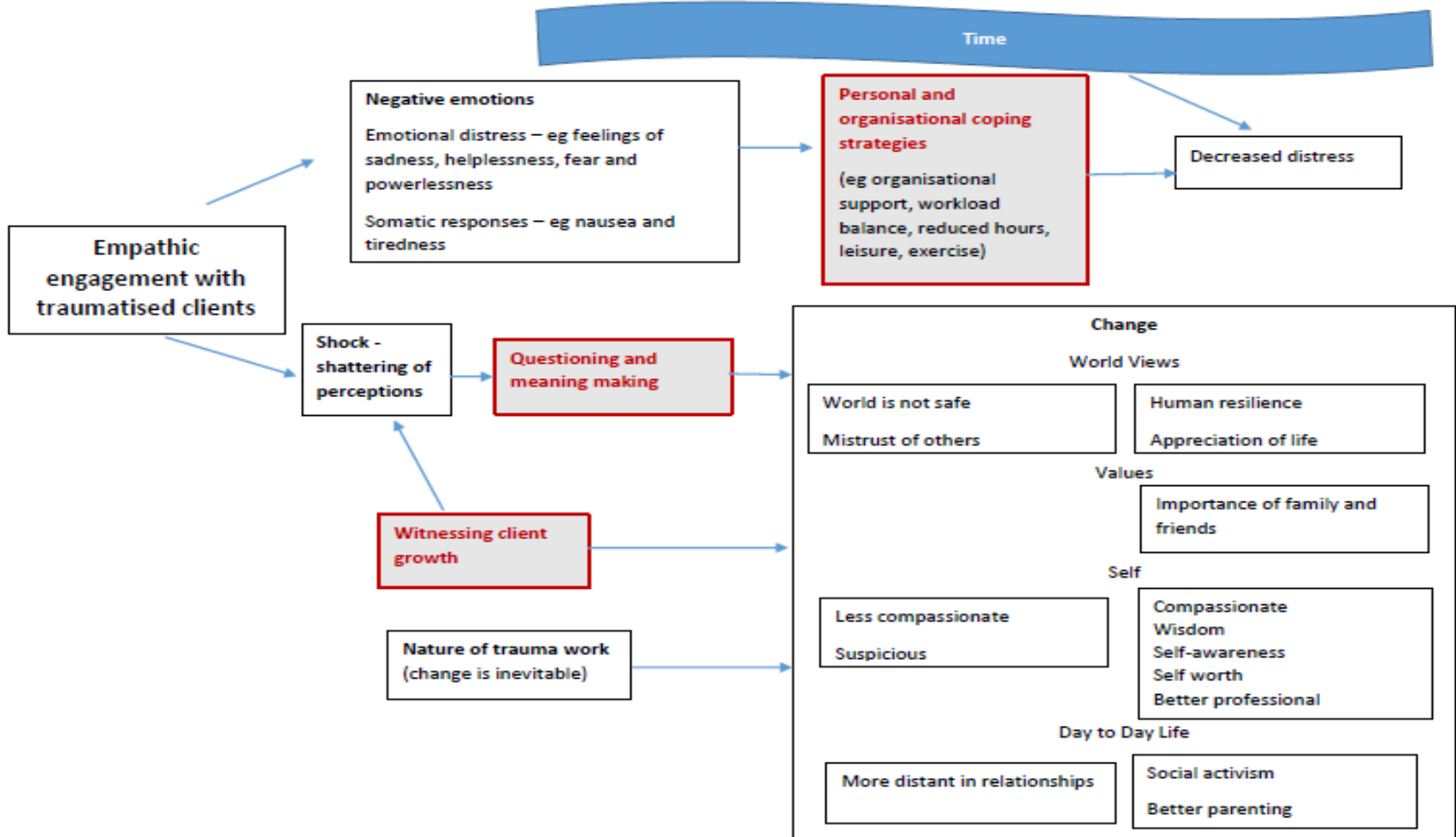
Resilience: personal strength, psychological growth and empowerment as a consequence of listening to client accounts of resilience, perseverance and growth

Overall, perceived worker growth and enrichment of their interpersonal relationships, self-perception, and life philosophy.

10 years worth of discussion and research on vicarious post traumatic growth, vicarious resilience, compassion satisfaction.

Cohen and Collens (2013) meta-synthesis

Model of vicarious trauma and vicarious post traumatic growth



Model of trauma workers vicarious posttraumatic growth (adapted from Cohens and Collens 2013)

Note that active processes or "working parts" of the model have been modified and presented in red text boxes.

Cohen and Collens (2013) meta-synthesis of 20 peer reviewed qualitative studies of trauma workers experience of vicarious trauma and vicarious growth.

Assumptions of the model:

- Negative and positive impacts of the work do occur and can co-occur
- Over time workers develop self care and coping strategies that decrease the distress or negative experience
- Workers universally experience a period of shock or shattering of perceptions as they are first exposed to trauma material
- Shock is a precursor to engaging in questioning and meaning making processes that transform sense of the world, self and others
- Witnessing client growth can be a shock but also influences the worker perceptions of the world, self and others

FASSTT – Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma

- A network of Australia's eight specialist rehabilitation agencies that work with survivors of refugee torture and trauma
- Range of service delivery varies depending on client / community need, and on the service delivery model of the agency – however all FASSTT provide trauma counselling

FASSTT agencies ideal for this study

- Nature of refugee experience of intentional harm, that is often prolonged and repeated... is complex trauma
- No screening for trauma counsellors required as all FASSTT counselling clients are traumatised and trauma counselling is the nature of the work
- For most counsellors, they have substantial life or practice experience before they start working at a FASSTT agency

Research participants

Interviewed 11 clinical supervisors from 6 (of 8) FASSTT agencies:

- Between 2 and 20 years experience as clinical supervisors (average 6 years)
- Men and women, diverse cultural background
- Professional backgrounds of psychologists, social workers and counsellors

Supervision context maybe a limitation

- Primary supervision is considered a space for counsellors to resolve client “problems”
- Counsellors may be hesitant to openly discuss or explore the impacts of the work on themselves to a supervisor internal to the agency
- The experience of the counsellor may not be fully evident to the supervisor, if the counsellor is primarily accessing supports outside of the supervision process

What did FASSTT clinical supervisors say about this model?

Proactively managing vicarious trauma is crucial and supervision is a valuable opportunity for this to occur:

- Facilitate meaning making and self awareness
- Prompt self care (although this alone is not enough)

Meaning making in supervision

In the session how did you respond, what did you do, how did you look after yourself, how did you shift, what happened in your body, how did you react, what did that say about what you're thinking or what does that tell you about your role or who you are or how you're doing.

Research Participant

Self awareness often promoted as the best tool for managing vicarious trauma

Meaning making is challenging

I think the number one thing would be the pain of knowing the awfulness the utter awfulness of things that can happen to individuals and societies. To really look at that and be able to shift into a different way of seeing this world and being able to still do this work.

Research Participant

The supervision space and relationship cognisant of how challenging the work and exploring the effects of the work can be.

More than self care

You see in the literature a focus on self-care strategies and work life balance. I find that in itself doesn't transform all of vicarious trauma when it has affected your world view, your beliefs, your ideas about humanity. You can do all self care and coping strategies well and you might not really touch meaning making. And I think that is the time also when people's self care and supports might fall.

Research Participant

What did FASSTT clinical supervisors say about this model?

Challenged aspects of the model

- Model is too linear – the reality is that this is a dynamic, cyclic process.
- To be shocked by client growth is a narrow, clinical, victim focussed, pathological frame.
- The greater shock is the political or social context in Australia – this shock can be harder for counsellors to resolve and disturbs people's national identity and sense of self.

Witnessing growth – trauma recovery

It is the curiosity about how people survive such terrible things. It's not the interest in the terrible thing. That's where you, if you get bogged down in that you're not really going to be able to do the work. You have to be curious about how people have found meaning, have made meaning, have whatever little things they're doing. Sometimes they can be very, very tiny. So I think that that's really the work, that's it.

Research Participant

Looking for growth

So actually really exploring what that means so that people are finely attuned to the negative impacts of trauma but also the positive impacts of the work that they are doing. When that happens you can see when someone thinks about their work and sees that there is positive change, that lifts that heaviness and there is a greater appreciation of the work and the client and their capacities as well.

Research Participant

Looking for growth

[T]o look for these moments and catch these moments, to reflect on them and support their client's growth... because definitely the purpose of the therapy is not to keep the person with us for their entire life. We need to facilitate personal growth.

..to leave the trauma – they cannot forget the trauma, and then point is not to forget it - but to learn about themselves in a way that they could survive, that they have great capacities, strengths, that they are resilient and that they could use this experience in a positive way in their life.

Research Participant

Recognising the political context of the work

The other thing is - nothing in this model that addresses the context of worker and the work. It is all about what they see with the client. But you go to work on a day when the government has made a decision that has an effect on the client population as a whole, that can be the thing that shatter perception and shocks the worker, not the client trauma.

Research Participant

Social-political context is the shock

A good example in the asylum seeker context is the shattering of perceptions that Australia is a decent humane and caring society....counsellors are feeling powerless, hearing the horrendous stories and feeling very ineffective about what is happening in detention.

Research Participant

conclusion

There is a dynamic relationship between negative somatic and emotional impacts, development of coping strategies, meaning making processes and witnessing client growth.

Supervisors see that a multifaceted, holistic, systemic approach to understand and manage vicarious trauma and promote of vicarious growth is needed in refugee trauma recovery agency.

limitations

- Small study – only 11 participants
- More experienced supervisors spoke extensively about growth and meaning making
- Would be greatly enriched by a triangulated study that included supervisees as participants

THANK YOU