Recognizing and Responding to Secondary Trauma

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Megan Hope, MSW, is the Social Service Project Director at the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network (RMIAN), a non-profit provider of free immigration legal assistance to immigrant children throughout Colorado and to adults in immigration detention. Megan has worked with RMIAN’s Social Service Project almost since its establishment in 2010. The project provides behavioral health support, legal case support, and release planning to particularly vulnerable adults in immigration detention, including people with mental illness and survivors of violence. Megan also conducts know-your-rights presentations to detained immigrant adults through RMIAN’s Legal Orientation Program and is a Board of Immigration Appeals accredited legal representative (full accreditation--USCIS, BIA, EOIR). For close to six years, Megan also served as coordinator of RMIAN’s Human Trafficking Project. She performed in-depth trafficking screenings with adults and children, including unaccompanied minors served through RMIAN’s Children’s Program, and provided legal case support and social services coordination for trafficked clients.

Megan has worked with immigrant communities since 1995, including as a staff member and current member of the board of directors of Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas; migrant advocate, immigration paralegal, and grant writer with Legal Aid of Western Missouri’s Migrant Farmworker Project; former board president and clinic coordinator of the Kansas City Worker Justice Center; and activist with other immigrant and worker rights organizations. For several years she conducted evaluations of child sponsorship programs in Latin America and Asia. She has a MA in Latin American Studies from the University of Kansas and MSW from the University of Denver.
Overview

- Trauma
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Secondary trauma
  - Risk factors
  - Signs
  - Prevention and response
Trauma

“Overwhelming demands placed upon the physiological system that result in a profound felt sense of vulnerability and/or loss of control.” – Robert D. Macy, PhD.

- Threats to life, bodily integrity/physical safety, or close personal encounters with violence or death
- Via direct experience, witnessing, hearing about
- Chronic over-activation of fear response → impaired executive functioning → compromised ability to engage and achieve goals

“Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.” – Judith Herman, MD
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- Re-experiencing
- Avoidance
- Negative alterations in cognition and mood
- Alterations in arousal and reactivity
Secondary trauma

• Emotional duress that results from exposure to others’ first-hand trauma experiences
• Symptoms similar to those of PTSD
Risk factors for secondary trauma among professionals working with traumatized children*

- Empathy
- Insufficient recovery time
- Unresolved personal trauma
- Children are the most vulnerable members of our society
- Isolation and systemic fragmentation
- Lack of systemic resources

## Signs of secondary trauma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings</th>
<th>Thoughts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easily overwhelmed, pessimistic, cynical, depressed, unmotivated, numb,</td>
<td>Intrusive work-related thoughts or dreams, increased obsessive thoughts,</td>
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<td>out of control, disconnected from others, adrift, on edge, wanting to</td>
<td>mind wandering, difficulty making decisions, making poor decisions</td>
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<td>run away from it all, despairing, suspicious, increasingly worried and</td>
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<td>anxious, feeling “no one understands,” feeling in danger, feeling unsafe</td>
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## Signs of secondary trauma

<table>
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<th>Physical</th>
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<td>Low energy, fatigue, loss of interest in sex, aches and pains, being accident-prone</td>
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<th>Behavioral</th>
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<td>Social withdrawal, difficulty keeping appropriate relationship boundaries, difficulty setting limits, involvement in “risky” activities (drugs, alcohol, sex), increased irritability and agitation, violating ethical standards, decreased work productivity, decreased respect for others, increased blaming of others, increased compulsive behaviors, decreased interest in self-care</td>
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How have you experienced secondary trauma?

What have the signs been? What brought it on?
Preventing and responding to secondary trauma (conventional wisdom)

- **DO THE BASICS:** Eat well, get enough sleep, exercise, seek health care when needed

- **RELAX:** Practice deep breathing, meditation, visualization, mindfulness, yoga, hobbies

- **LIGHTEN and STRENGTHEN:** Think of, look at, do happy and positive things; laugh; seek out good news; cry; celebrate victories (and even losses—they mean you are taking on challenging work); praise yourself and others

- **TAKE BREAKS:** Divide up emotional tasks; get up and walk; unplug from e-mail, news, social media, and screens at some point

- **KEEP HEALTHY BOUNDARIES:** Say “no,” set limits, know your role, keep work/life balance, use sick and vacation time
How do you practice self-care?

Have your practices helped you prevent or deal with secondary trauma? What challenges or limitations regarding self-care do you encounter?
Preventing and responding to secondary trauma (additional ideas)

- **TALK TO SOMEONE:** Regularly debrief with co-workers, supervisors, a therapist, professional assistance organizations, or other confidants.

- **ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs:** [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance.html](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance.html)

- **MAKE A REALISTIC PLAN:** Choose one or two small, incremental changes or practices.

- **DRAW ON YOUR OWN WISDOM:** Think of what has helped sustain you during difficult situations in the past. Do what works.

- **SEEK STRUCTURAL CHANGES:** Ask for/help create a trauma-informed work place with reasonable work loads and meaningful support and assistance for employees.

- **FIND A WORLD VIEW THAT SUSTAINS YOU IN THE FACE OF PERSONAL TRAGEDIES AND SYSTEMIC INJUSTICES:** Confront privilege and oppression; make peace with your humanness and limitations; believe in goodness and resilience.
Questions? Ideas?

Thank you!

All images in this presentation are by Rini Templeton, https://riniart.com/

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