

Organizational Strategies to

Alleviate Vicarious Trauma

at Sexual Assault Coalitions



by The Resource Sharing Project



Why the Kelp Motif?

It started as a misunderstanding.

Someone at RSP said “seek help” but the person listening thought they said “sea kelp.”

And after a little bit of wondering about sea kelp, we learned that sea kelp forests are one way to remove harmful carbon in the atmosphere, just like the strategies explored in this booklet are one way to decrease the harmful effects of vicarious trauma.

Next time you are feeling overwhelmed by the scope of sexual assault coalition work, we hope it helps remind you to seek help from RSP and your other TA providers.

Introduction

Our daily work is centered on the trauma of sexual violence, and thus, it is important for us to be aware of and work to mitigate vicarious trauma.

Even though many coalition staff members do not interact with individual survivors in the same way that local programs do, we are still exposed to traumatic material and the risk of vicarious trauma.

At many coalitions, there are staff members who do provide direct services to survivors, through such services as legal assistance or facilitation of a statewide hotline. Survivors often call coalitions for support, oftentimes in search of local resources or to seek assistance when their situation is too complex for their local program, or they have a connection or barrier to that program.

Understanding, preventing, and relieving vicarious trauma is both an individual and organizational challenge, for coalitions as

well as the member programs we serve. Working with trauma survivors, directly or indirectly, exposes us to the reality of violence in ways that other services, including other types of counseling or advocacy do not.

The weight of the work we do affects us in many ways, including our sense of safety, trust in self and others, self-esteem, ability to connect with others, and sense of control (Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Trippany, et al., 2004). Taking care of ourselves while taking care of others allows us to “contribute to our society with such impact that we will leave a legacy informed by our deepest wisdom and greatest gifts instead of burdened with our struggles and despairs” (van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009).

Current research on vicarious trauma examines the effects on direct service providers, so little is known about how vicarious trauma manifests for those providing indirect services, like coalitions.

In 2016, the Resource Sharing Project (RSP) conducted a survey of coalitions

about exposure to and experiences of vicarious trauma.

Based on the results from that survey*, RSP identified four strategies that coalitions could implement at an organizational level to decrease the negative impacts of vicarious trauma on coalition staff.

Each strategy is explained in this booklet. Under the strategy name, we include an overview and a list of concrete actions coalition leadership can take to promote these strategies. Each coalition is unique so the actions listed are offered as inspiration and a place to begin discussion.

It is our hope that all sexual assault coalitions are able to use this information to create ways of working that allow deep healing and transformation for all.

* You can download the full survey results and discussion publication at www.resource-sharingproject.org

Hope

Vicarious trauma can make us feel hopeless about our work and mistrustful of other people.

Spending our days thinking about sexual violence can obscure the good things in the world, and we sometimes lose sight of the progress we're making.

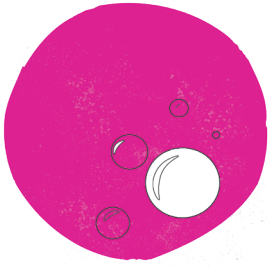
Because our work to end sexual violence is so important, it's easy to feel we can never take a break. However, time away from work is what keeps us balanced.



How we talk about things affects how we interpret them and experience them.

Every day, we witness survivors reclaiming their voices and bodies, and communities taking steps to prevent sexual violence. This is amazing. **We need to remind ourselves and each other periodically of the power we see and the power we have:**

- Develop a shared vision of hope and healing.
- Regularly talk about our dedication to and strategies for ending violence as a team.
- Connect to our communities in positive ways, unrelated to violence, like participating in cultural celebrations (Juneteenth, LGBTQ Pride, 16 de Septiembre, Diwali, etc.) or joining community groups.



Hope:

The Leadership Lens

1. Make progress measurable and connected to the bigger picture:
 - Acknowledge and celebrate successes, however small.
 - Discuss how coalition successes (new legislation, etc.) are tied to positive outcomes for survivors and advocates.
 - Tie coalition activities to local progress at member programs and the activities that help survivors in their healing.
2. Provide opportunities to take part in social change and anti-oppression activities.
3. Support local programs' events and activism—have staff attend events like Take Back the Night as part of work duties.

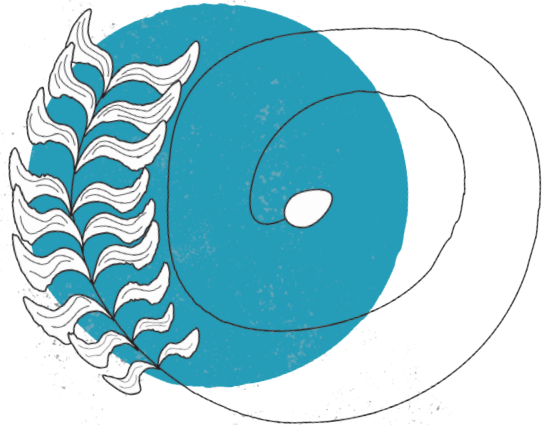
4. Evaluate staff usage of leave time a few times a year, to make sure staff are regularly taking breaks. Likewise, pay attention to the timestamps on emails and other patterns you might pick up. If a staff member is regularly checking email at midnight, ask about it in supervision.

Worth


Sexual violence is overwhelming and trauma is complex.

Common consequences of vicarious trauma are feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, fear, and low self-worth.

Being one step removed from direct service, coalition staff particularly struggle with feelings of inadequacy and ineffectiveness. For staff who face oppression in their lives, daily interactions sometimes reinforce negative societal messages about their worth as human beings.

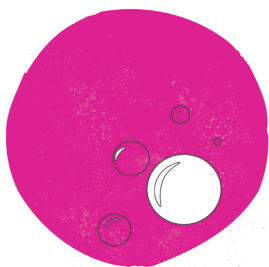


As we work with one another, normalize feelings and offer validation for each other. Reframe negative narratives. Instead of telling ourselves, "That was a hard call and I feel terrible because I didn't have any answers," we can reframe it as, "That was a hard call, but the survivor was so brave for calling. I'm glad I was able to listen and connect him with local resources."



...normalize feelings and offer validation for each other.

We must also discuss explicitly and regularly how our work is supporting healing and making a difference in survivors' and advocates' lives. Talk about our values on active listening and empowerment: answering a call and providing empathic presence is supportive to survivors and can make a difference.



Worth:

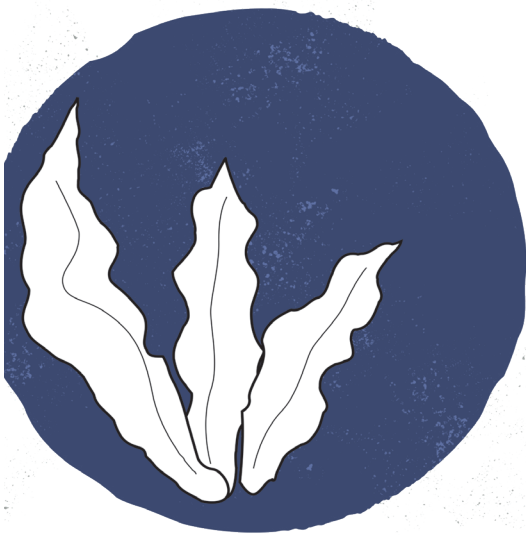
The Leadership Lens

1. For staff who live with oppression, provide access to networking opportunities with others who have shared identities or experiences
2. Engage in trauma-informed supervision:
 - Treat each staff member as an individual, considering the different needs of staff with a direct service role and younger or less experienced staff.
 - Diversify supervision style according to staff members' projects and job duties; at times, some workers may need extra supervisory support or extra down time (for example, an attorney after a trial, or your trainer after a statewide conference).
 - Provide additional support to staff who must interact with various forms of oppression in their work

or who face oppression in their daily lives, checking in about the safety and comfort of their work assignments.


3. Ensuring that staff have good equipment, such as ergonomic desks and chairs, and encouraging them to take breaks shows that the organization cares about their health and wellbeing.
4. Travel and long training days disrupt our routines, contact with loved ones, and self-care habits. Check in with staff about what they need to manage their schedule and vicarious trauma.
5. Break large projects down into smaller, more manageable pieces to help employees feel a greater sense of control and agency in their work.
6. Review policies and procedures for how well they support all staff members' faiths, cultures, and definitions of family.

Security



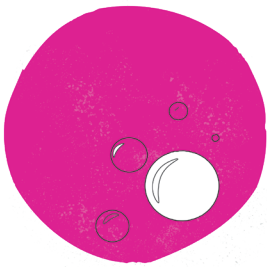
Everyone has a basic need for clarity in job roles and responsibilities, safety, and consistency. Creating a culture of expectation and routine can help mitigate negative effects of vicarious trauma.

Knowledge about vicarious trauma can help us be prepared to respond to it. When we have clarity around expectations and effects, we are more confident and secure.



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As a way to increase knowledge and empowerment, we can normalize the experience of vicarious trauma and provide information on it. Working on projects in teams is also helpful, particularly on hard assignments or when traveling across the state/territory, can provide emotional security and support.



Security:

The Leadership Lens

1. Be clear about job expectations regarding the role of supporting survivors and advocates:
 - Provide training and orientation for this support role, including ongoing training.
 - Have clear agency protocol on crisis intervention, work sharing, and down time (vacation, etc.).
 - Orient new employees to the nature and reality of our work.
 - Train staff on crisis intervention.
 - Set clear expectations, perhaps even including very occasional crisis work in job descriptions, that responding to crisis calls is an important, if infrequent, function of the coalition.

2. Be clear about other job expectations, project deliverables, and agency operations to reduce any role ambiguity and anxiety.

3. Provide access to outside supports like counseling, stress management, and health and wellness services, (Bell, et al., 2003) and consider investing in an Employee Assistance Program.

4. Many supervisors have a standard list of check-in questions, often related to progress on projects. It's helpful to add questions about leave time, self-care, and work boundaries to encourage staff to work on self-care and to enhance the organizational culture of care. No news isn't always good news: don't assume staff are fine.

5. Assess the physical and emotional safety and comfort with staff of their work spaces (in the office or out). Pay particular attention to the safety and comfort of staff who live with oppression.

Connection

Vicarious trauma can make us feel disconnected and lonely.

Coalition work naturally has some isolation in it, geographically, socially, and professionally, and this can exacerbate our vicarious trauma.

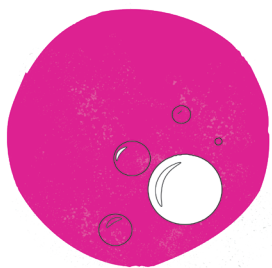
Creating opportunities for connection is a remedy for vicarious trauma in itself, and makes possible other remedies.



You can use the RSP to connect to sister coalitions and to get support from your peers. Make time in staff meetings to discuss vicarious trauma and debrief challenges. Check in about how everyone is doing.

Taking part in member programs' events and celebrating successes of our member programs also helps us feel positively connected to our members and local communities, enhancing the relationship for both sides.

Work to build an organizational culture that values collective responsibility. Each player has to take ownership over their own role on the team but everyone needs to show support and help out.



Connection:

The Leadership Lens

1. Regular supervision is the best way to make all staff feel connected to the coalition and its mission. Optimally, each staff person should have an individual, weekly check-in meeting with their supervisor.
2. Build norms for debriefing with supervisors and coworkers, including norms on boundaries and consent. Encourage staff to ask permission to debrief ("I just had a hard crisis call. Is it okay to debrief with you right now?") as it helps the supporter be more present and anchored to hear the situation.
3. For coalitions that have staff all in one location, eating lunch together is a great way to achieve connectedness and self-care. Tasks that have a beginning and an end such as a packing/envelope stuffing party for large shipments or mailings can also enhance the team bond.

4. For coalitions that have off-site staff (or for whom there is no one central office), use technology to support the team connection. For example, have a virtual potluck where everyone brings their lunch to a conference call or Skype session.

5. Coalition leadership can set expectations and provide good role modeling by taking personal leave time, not checking email after hours, and creating other boundaries between work and home to help staff manage their own self-care better and feel safe and supported at work.

**Want to explore vicarious trauma
at sexual assault coalitions more?**

Explore these and other topics on our
website at:

<https://www.resourcesharingproject.org>

or reach out to an RSP staff member to
schedule an individual conversation.

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Illustrations and graphic design by
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Photoshop texture brushes courtesy of Retro Supply Co.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2011-TA-AX-K054 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

