

Responding to Crimes with Children on Scene: Trauma-Informed Tools and Techniques

*Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services
Trauma Response and the Criminal Justice System*

Becky Haas, Presenter

Learning Objectives

- Age appropriate ways to reduce trauma on scene for kids
- Five core message for justice professionals to remember in DV situations
- Arresting caregivers
- Tactical breathing
- Empathy in policing
- Provider self-care

What Traumatic Stress Reactions May Look Like On-scene

- **Physical**

- Shaking
- Increased heart rate
- Physical complaints (headaches, body aches)
- Hives
- Diarrhea
- Inactivity or slow physical movement
- Physically stuck, slow/nonresponsive (or immobilized)
- Nausea and vomiting

- **Emotional**

- Inconsistent emotions that are “all over the map”
- Wailing, sobbing
- Volatile, angry
- Verbally attacking others
- Absence of feelings
- Blank stare
- Inappropriate emotions
- Sudden fits of laughter
- Giggling

Cognitive

- Confused - Difficulty making decisions
- Loses of train of thought – has incoherent thoughts
- Talks about things that seem random or not connected to what is being asked
- Gets “stuck”
- Preoccupied with elements of the event
- Thoughts are dominated by fixed focus on particular elements of the event
- Makes pressured demands for more information, regardless of attempts at redirection
- Repeats concerns or questions in spite of information that has been made available or the fact that more information is not available
- Memory loss or inconsistent memory about events
- Poor sense of time
- Inability to recall place and identifying information regarding suspects and others involved in the event

Behavioral

- Agitated
- Pacing
- Moving hands and arms in a nervous fashion
- Foot tapping
- Finger drumming
- Swiveling head
- Darting eyes
- Immobilized
- Inactivity or slow movement
- Withdrawn/isolated
- Seeming stunned and slow to respond to external cues and stimuli such as questions, attempts to make eye contact, etc.
- Irritable - Angry
- Verbal outbursts/yelling
- Fatigued
- Young children may be
- Clingy
- Fussy
- Running around

(International Association of Chiefs of Police and Yale Child Study Center. 2017. Enhancing Police Responses to Children Exposed to Violence: A Toolkit for Law Enforcement.)

Reactions Justice Professionals May Observe on Scene

Young Children (0-5)W	School Age Children (6-12)	Teenagers (13 and up)
Appear a little standoffish	Appear a little standoffish	Are very affected by peers' attitudes of justice professionals
Appear scared	Have notions of police as good or bad	Have trouble dealing with authority
Appear shy	Act very curious	Want to appear brave or standoffish, especially when in a group of peers
Need reassurance from caregivers when around police	Are often proud to know an officer	Conflicted about relationships with authority figures
Depend on their caregivers for safety and security, even around police	Have lots of questions about officers tools (the gun, the car, sirens)	May be confrontational or rude
(c) BeckyHaas.com 2021	Want to know how many "bad guys" an officer has arrested or shot	Capable of being cooperative and friendly

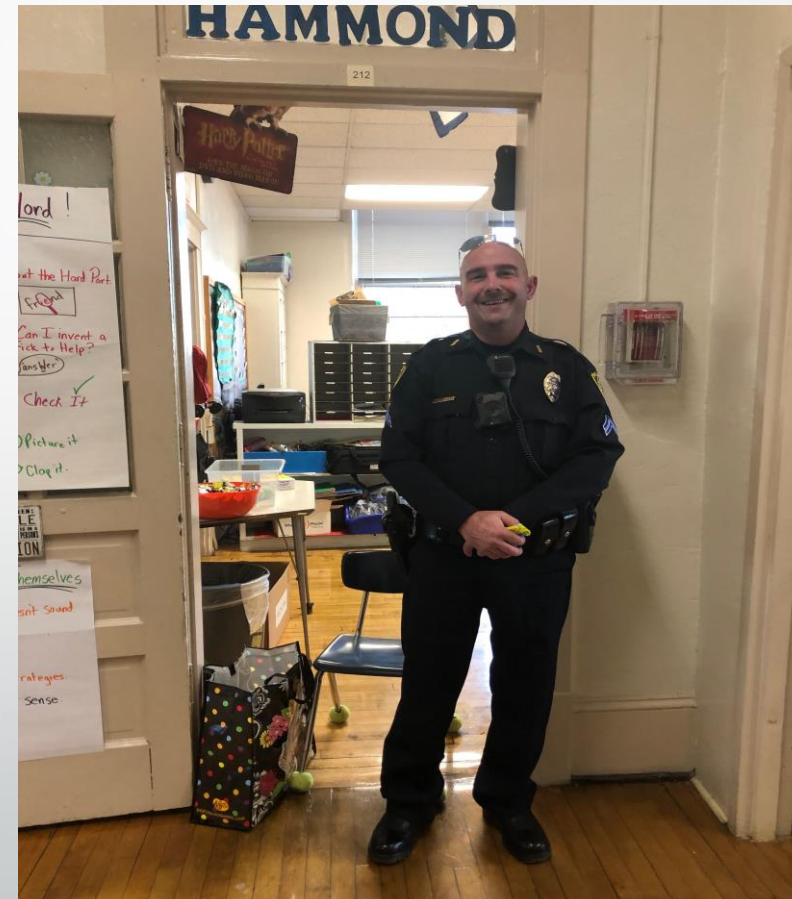
Vera Institute of Justice

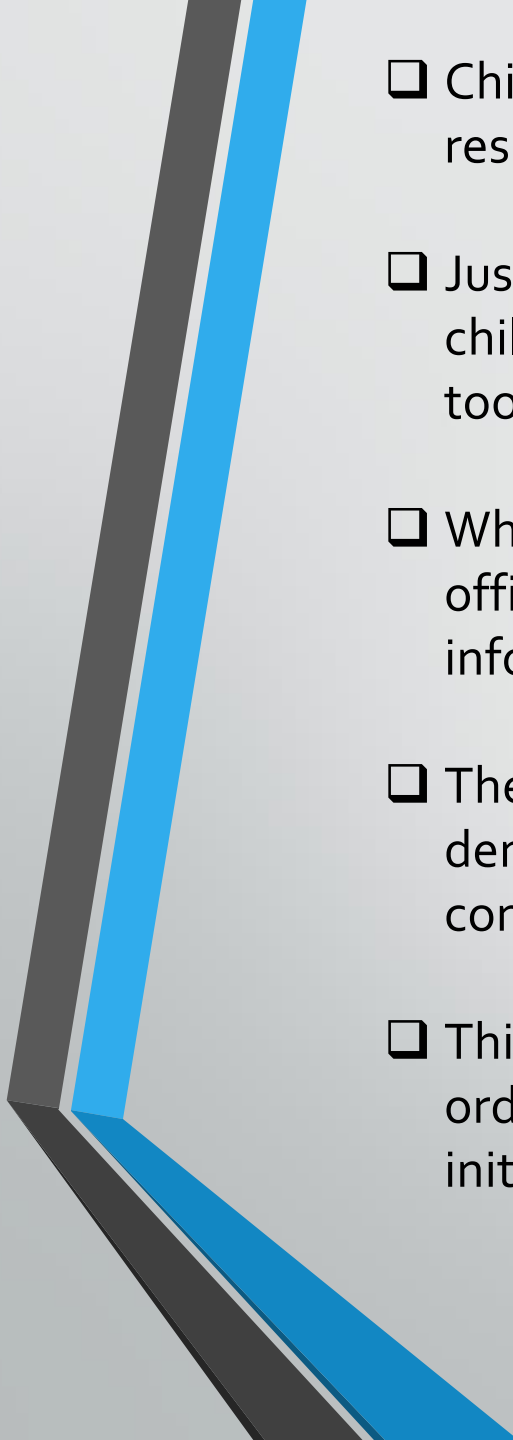


(c) BeckyHaas.com 2021

Trauma Informed Justice

- Safety and Security
- Validation and Ventilation
- Preparation and Prediction



- 
- ☐ Children often have many questions for officers and justice professionals who are responding to calls for service.
 - ☐ Justice professionals may feel uncertain about how directly they should answer children's questions or might be concerned that any information they offer may be too much for children to handle.
 - ☐ When children are dealing with chaotic and upsetting events, police officers/justice professionals can be the most reliable and critical sources of order, information and adult support available on-scene.
 - ☐ The simple acts of listening and responding to questions can be reassuring demonstrations to children that they have not been forgotten and that their concerns matter.
 - ☐ This kind of interaction helps to re-establish the very basic sense of predictability, order, and safety that is lost in the aftermath of violent events and is essential in initiating a process of recovery.

Child – Why are Police Here?	Child: What's happening to my mom/dad?	Child: Why did the ambulance come?
<p>Officer: Because adults got out of control and the police are here to help everyone get back in control.</p> <p>It is not okay for people to hurt each other and that's why we are here.</p> <p>Sometimes even grown-ups need help from us (the police) to stop hurting each other and get things safe again.</p>	<p>Officer: Mom/dad needs help getting back under control.</p> <p>We need to take mom/dad down to the police station.</p>	<p>Officer: The ambulance needs to take mom/dad to the hospital so that they can be checked out and helped by the doctor.</p> <p>As soon as the doctors know more about how your mom/dad is doing, we will tell you about that.</p>

Effective Justice/Police Responses

Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Children Exposed to Violence and Childhood Trauma

- **Infants (0-12 months)**
- Recognize on scene can be chaotic and infants are being exposed to tremendous stimuli
- Guide the infant to be moved to the least chaotic part of the scene
- Show concern for the child's safety with your words and actions
- Remind caregivers how important it is for them to get calm first in order to show support for their young children
- Help caregivers decrease their own distress
- When caregivers are not able to respond to their children, identify alternate caregivers to attend to infants

Toddlers – Preschoolers (12 months to 5 years)

- Ensure the child is physically safe and sufficiently monitored
- Help caregivers to become calm and in control
- Help the caregivers find a place they can sit and address them in a calm, respectful but authoritative manner
- When speaking to the child, get down on their level by kneeling or sitting
- Seek out an alternative caregiver if parents are unable to respond



School Age Children (6-12 years old)

- Attempt to limit the child's further exposure to out-of-control behavior once you arrive on scene
- Find out what questions children have and talk to them about what happened in direct and plain language
- Keep them in a location on scene where they are safe
- If children are so distressed that they are unable to put their thoughts into words:
- Teach Tactical Breathing
- Help children re-engage the thinking part of their brain by drawing, coloring or distracting
- Support caregivers in meeting the children's needs and seek out an alternative caregiver if necessary

Adolescents (13-18 years)

- Take behaviors of concern or any verbalized unsafe thoughts seriously
- Keep in mind that adolescents are especially vulnerable to humiliation and help teenagers “save face”
- Offer support and guidance
- Set clear expectations and firm limits
- Be aware that when officers respond to teens with respect and genuine engagement, they can be surprisingly eager and receptive to the calming authority that officers can offer

Domestic Violence Calls with Children on Scene

1. All children are affected by domestic violence; however, each child reacts in a different way.
2. Children living with domestic violence often have complicated feelings about their parents.
3. Children often worry that they are responsible for the violence in their homes.
4. Police Officers really matter to kids.
5. There are simple things police officers can do while on the scene to help reduce the impact of domestic violence on children.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network; Cops, Kids and Domestic Violence Officer Training Video;
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/cops-kids-and-domestic-violence-law-enforcement-training-video>

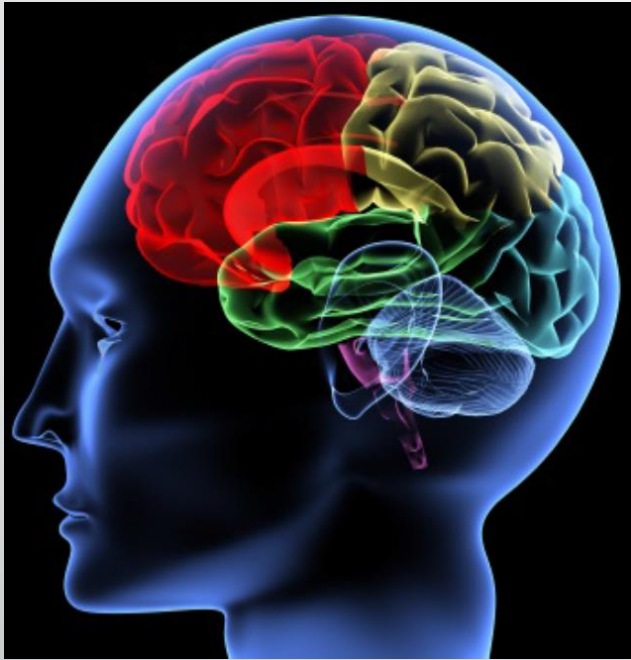
Reducing Trauma When A Parent is Arrested:

- To know the parent's arrest is NOT their fault
- To know what is happening to their parent
- To know if they can have contact with their parent and when
- To know with whom and where they will be staying while their parent is incarcerated
- To know its okay to still love their parent and its okay sometimes to feel angry
- To realize people make choices in life that can have consequences

Enhancing Police Responses to Children Exposed to Violence

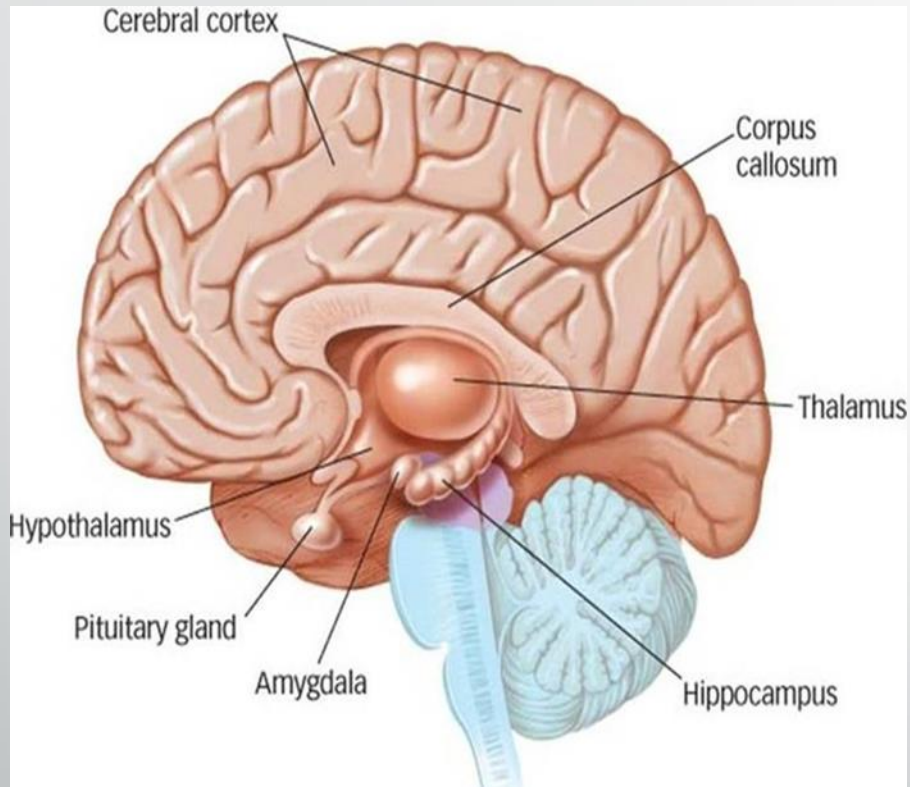
<https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/CEVToolkit.pdf>

Trauma and the Brain



- The brain has a “bottom up” organization
- The bottom controls the most simple functions such as respiration, heart rate, and blood pressure
- The top areas control more complex functions such as thinking and regulating emotions

The Brain's Response to Stress



- The “fire alarm” of the brain is located in the amygdala
- The frontal lobes of the cortex (at the top or the thinking part of the brain) shut down to make sure a person is focusing completely on survival
- That’s why it’s hard to think when in a crisis

Problem Behavior or Survival Behavior?

- The amygdala responses are: fight, flight or freeze and these are activated by danger.
 - Three sets of “problems” often attributed to people we serve show how these behaviors may really be a survival mechanism.
 - Recognize “symptoms” and “problem behaviors” as adaptations to trauma
- **FIGHT**
 - Non-compliant, combative OR struggling to regain/ hold onto personal power
 - **FLIGHT**
 - Resistant, uncooperative OR disengaged, withdrawing
 - **FREEZE**
 - Passive, unmotivated OR giving in to those in power

What Does Trauma Look Like?



Tactical Breathing

- **Tactical breathing**
 - A simple way to help a child or an adult regain focus and a sense of control is to teach them how to take calming and focused breaths
 - Tactical breathing is a tool widely deployable and useful in many situations.
 - Mental health professionals often use this skill, but it is a skill police officers can use as well.

Why is Tactical Breathing Important?

- When children experience or witness violence or traumatic events, they may feel anxious, confused, or overwhelmed.
- When people have these feelings, they often tend to take short, quick, shallow breaths or even hyperventilate.
- Shallow breaths can make the feeling of anxiety worse.

Importance of Empathy

- Members of Law Enforcement regularly engage in showing empathy
 - Suicide of a teenager
 - Child drowning
 - Victim of a robbery
 - Domestic violence victim

Members of law enforcement must engage with sexual assault victims with empathy as well.

Examples of Empathetic Responses

- I'm sorry that happened to you."
- "What happened was not your fault."
- "Thank you for trusting me by sharing your story."
- "You are not to blame for what happened to you."



A Mississippi firefighter tries to calm a terrified child, who was in a violent car crash, by laying down with him and playing the movie "Happy Feet" on his phone. This man is obviously right where he needs to be in life. This is going above saving and treating.

Empathetic Listening

- **Empathy Blockers**
 - One-Upping
 - Advising/Fixing
 - Educating
 - Judging
 - Analyzing
 - Discounting
 - Data Gathering

(The Relationship Foundation)

(c) BeckyHaas.com 2021



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

Provider Self-Care

- “In the unlikely event of a loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will fall from the panel above your head. Please fasten your OWN oxygen mask before attempting to help others around you.”

~ Flight attendant at the onset of any airline flight



Provider Self Care

(Resilient Wisconsin <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdM3lcoLsoA>)



(c) BeckyHaas.com 2021

The Facts

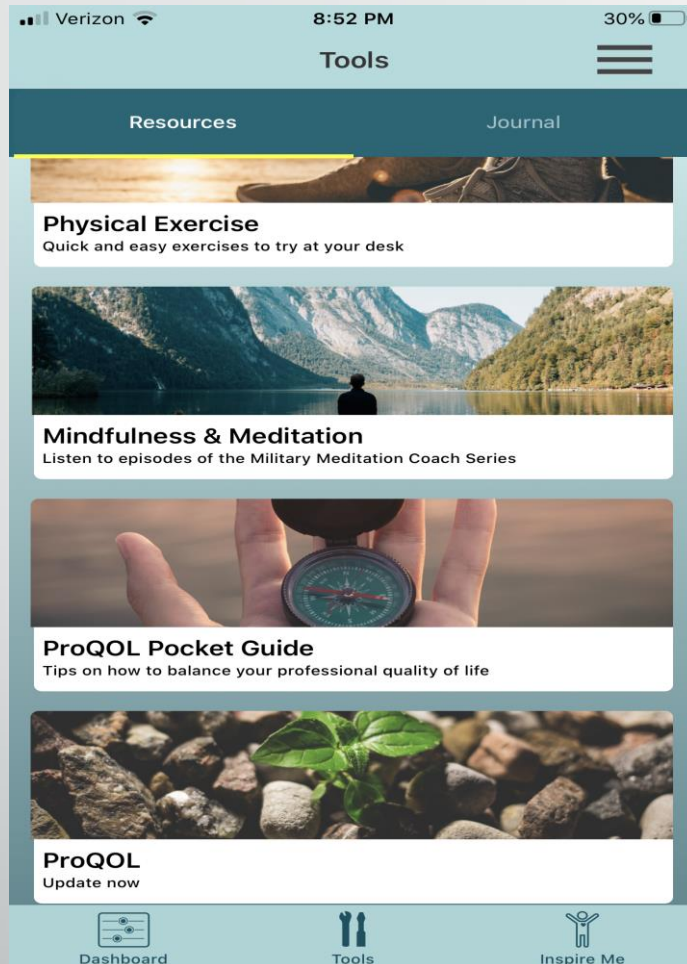
- Because officers respond to confrontation, conflict, and violence, they are exposed to trauma and death.
- These traumatic experiences carry significant mental health risks, including suicide, which disproportionately affects police officers.
- An estimated 159 officers took their lives in 2018, making death by suicide more likely than death from firearms and traffic-related accidents combined. Suicides in 2019 increased 24% over the same period in 2018.
- Officers are also more likely than the general population to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which increases the risk of substance use disorders.

Vicarious Trauma Toolkit

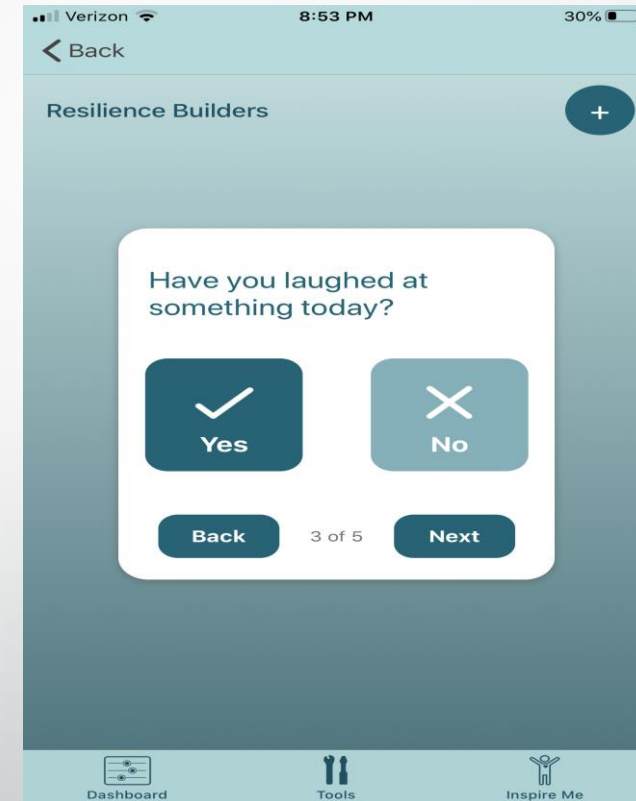
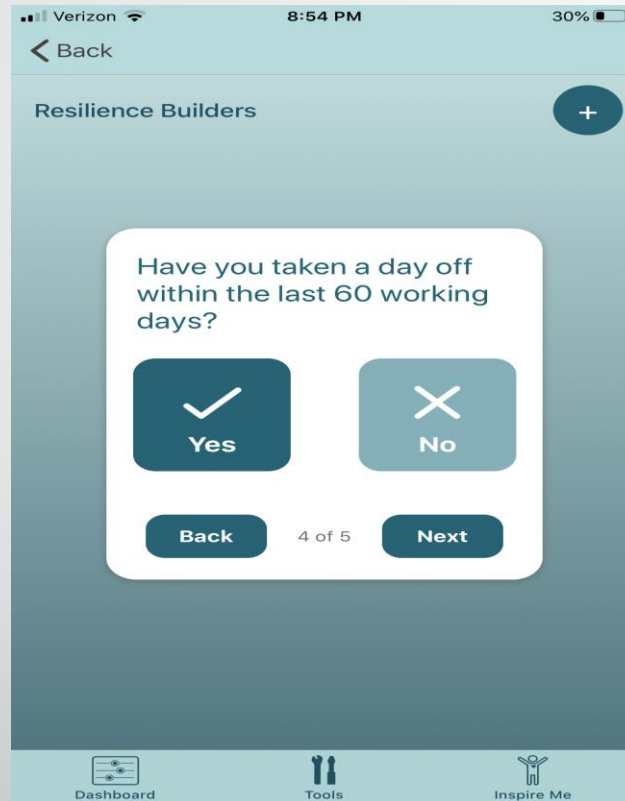
Office of Justice Programs

- The workplace culture is an enormously influential factor in addressing vicarious trauma because it shapes understanding of vicarious trauma as an expected and normal response to trauma exposure, which makes it easier for staff to openly seek and accept support
- (Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton 2003; Slattery and Goodman 2009).
- [Vicarious Trauma Toolkit \(VTT\)](#)
- Webinar explains using the toolkit
- Resources to assess current self-care support and how to create an action plan

Provider Resilience App



Professional Quality of Life Scale



ProQual

Compassion
Satisfaction



(c) BeckyHaas.com 2021

Compassion
Fatigue

Burnout

Secondary
Trauma

Profession Satisfaction

- Compassion satisfaction is the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well.
- You enjoy helping others through your work.
- You feel positively about your colleagues, your ability to contribute to the work setting or the greater good of society.



Compassion Fatigue

- Burnout is one of the elements of Compassion Fatigue (CF).
- It is associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in dealing with work or in doing your job effectively.
- These negative feelings usually have a gradual onset.
- Cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with increased workload and institutional stress, DOES NOT have to be trauma-related.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

- A side effect or result of seeing or hearing about acts of cruelty or suffering which causes permanent and often profound change in workers.
- Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic stress.



Help for First Responders

(Resilient Wisconsin <https://youtu.be/vW8suUZYuwM>)



(c) BeckyHaas.com 2021

Ask for Help – Know Your Resources

- Peers
 - Family
 - Friends
 - Coping strategies – What is YOUR safety plan?
 - What steps will you take to make your mental wellness a priority?
- Nationwide
 - Safe Call Now: 800-459-3020
24/7 confidential L.E. specific assistance
 - Serve and Protect: 615-373-8000
24/7 confidential L.E. specific assistance
 - Cop 2 Cop: 800-273-8255
Hotline staffed by retired L.E. who are now licensed support clinicians

Resources

- [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)
- [Vera Institute of Justice – Trauma Informed Policing](#)
- [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/cops-kids-and-domestic-violence-law-enforcement-training-video>
- Vicarious Trauma Toolkit <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/introduction>
- Enhancing Police Response to Children Exposed to Violence
<https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/CEVToolkit.pdf>

Contact Information

- Becky Haas
- <https://BeckyHaas.com>
- Email: Becky@Beckyhaas.com

