

# Strategies for Building Resilience

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## Stress and Trauma in the Workplace

Stress and trauma in corrections professionals are often underrecognized or underacknowledged. Although staff working with women are less likely to experience personal safety threats, there rarely is enough focus on the emotional consequences of working with a population with such significant needs.

In the spring 2011 issue of *Perspectives*, American Probation & Parole Association President Barbara Broderick states, “The psychological and emotional fall-out from job related stress can be harmful to both individuals and families, affecting individual well-being as well as interpersonal relations. Job performance may decline due to reduced energy, a less positive and balanced perspective and changed behavior.”

Most likely, at some point you have experienced extreme stress and/or trauma. Stress and trauma in the workplace is:

- Compounded by past or current personal experiences of extreme stress and trauma; and
- A strong reason for self-care, which should be seen as a necessity, *not* an indulgence.

## Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout

Three related terms that can help clarify trauma in the workplace are vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout. These terms are often used interchangeably or are commonly simply referred to as burnout. However, each of them has a different meaning and is a descriptor of some of the emotions we experience when working with a complex population such as justice-involved women.

### *Vicarious Trauma*

Vicarious trauma, also called secondary trauma and compassion fatigue, is any trauma that is experienced indirectly through involvement with others who have experienced or are experiencing trauma. Vicarious trauma, like other forms of trauma, may disrupt a person’s “sense of life meaning, connections to others, personal and professional identity, and assumptions or views of how the world works” (Pearlman and Saakvitne 1995).

As corrections professionals, we may witness disturbing events with the populations we work with (suicide attempts, cutting, physical violence), often with women who have been seriously influenced by traumatic life experiences. Over time, our interactions with troubled and harmed populations have the ability to erode our sense of fairness and compassion, and negatively affect how we see the world and what matters to us. Exposure to traumatic events or experiencing vicarious trauma can be magnified when coupled with our own unacknowledged and unaddressed personal experiences of stressful, perhaps even traumatic events.

### ***Compassion Fatigue***

One of the things that makes you an effective correctional worker – your ability to empathize with the people you are working with – may put you at risk for compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is fatigue, emotional distress, or apathy resulting from the constant demands of caring for others. Compassion fatigue can also occur when a professional connects so strongly with the woman offender that he or she begins to experience a similar impact as the woman. Note that “compassion fatigue” does not necessarily imply that overt trauma is involved or that the person has lost his or her desire to work in corrections.

### ***Burnout***

Burnout – a term commonly heard in the corrections profession – is defined as exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, usually because of prolonged stress or frustration, resulting in a desire to leave the job or occupation.

## **Monitoring Your Behavior**

It is critical to consistently monitor our behavior and reactions. Looking for personal warning signs is an important part of monitoring one’s behavior. If you feel that you are at risk for potentially crossing a professional boundary, then act. Begin by working to understand your behavior. Be honest with yourself, as you may find that you overly empathize with the woman and find that her story resonates with your own.

Work intentionally to correct your response. If you are not able to correct your response, then it is critical that you discuss the situation with your colleagues and/or supervisor.

## **Self-Care and Resilience**

Society gives us messages that may lead us to think that self-care is unimportant, a sign of weakness, or even selfish. This viewpoint is reflected in messages like, “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” or “Just get over it.”

If you are a woman, you may have been taught your role is to deny your own needs and put the needs of others first. Some cultural and religious traditions look at self-denial and suffering as a means to develop strength or salvation.

### **Self-Care**

Before you can take care of others, you have to take care of yourself. Think about the last time you were on an airplane. A standard message every time you fly is that you must put your oxygen mask on before you can assist others, particularly children. If you cannot breathe, you are not going to be in a position to assist someone else!

In your work situation, the same thing is true, even though it is not so obvious. If you are preoccupied with a stressful event in your own life, you may not notice that a situation at work is starting to

deteriorate, or you may not have the extra energy it takes to respond effectively when something happens.

When you have had a lot of stress in your life and have done nothing to deal with it, while you may be functioning at work, you may not be at your best. Your actions could even be detrimental. It is like a computer that has many background programs running – you just will not be as efficient or effective as possible because some of your “operating system capacity” is used up by unconsciously dealing with the background stress.

Realistically, none of us lives a stress-free life, and we all occasionally confront situations that are difficult and troubling. The key point is that if you attend to your own needs, you will be a better corrections professional.

## **Building Resilience**

Resilience is the ability to adapt well to stress, adversity, trauma, or tragedy.

Being resilient does not mean that individuals are free of problems or unaffected by difficulties. Resilience involves drawing on personal beliefs, behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strengths to move through stress, trauma, and tragedy without losing the ability to cope and enjoy life.

Resilience has been demonstrated in both adults and children. Research demonstrates that, on average, only 20 percent of adults who experience severe traumatic stressors develop PTSD. You can build resiliency by maintaining your own physical and psychological health and by training yourself to be conscious of stress and trauma in your life (Rousseau and Measham 2007).

In the past few years, the military and other organizations that routinely send people, such as international aid and disaster workers into high-stress environments have realized the importance of building and maintaining resilience.

The military has designed programs to build resilience in service members and their families by addressing eight areas of fitness:

- Psychological
- Physical
- Behavioral
- Social
- Nutritional
- Medical
- Spiritual
- Environmental

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), an international aid program, has a similar resiliency-training program. While you are not going into a war zone or natural disaster, the stresses

involved in some types of correctional work can be profound, and you need to attend to your own well-being.

In order to maximize your own resilience, you need to be able to:

- Assess the stressors that affect you;
- Have or develop a method to monitor your own physical, mental, and emotional state; and
- Practice techniques to optimize your wellness.

(Adapted from the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) “Justice-Involved Women” Course Series: Course 4: Effective Gender-Responsive Practices and Course 5: Building Individual and Organizational Resilience.)