CREATING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE

Organizations have a duty to help reduce the risk of vicarious traumatization in the workplace by offering an emotionally supportive, physically safe and respectful work environment (Brady, Poelstra & Brokaw, 1999). Here are some ways to ensure a healthy workplace:

• Provide specific training on vicarious trauma and burnout. All staff should be trained about the potential occupational hazards of trauma work and ways to protect themselves, as well as what the organization will do to help minimize the most negative effects (WCSAP, 2004). Training focused on “traumatology” is vital for trauma work and can decrease the impact of vicarious trauma (Trippany, Kress & Wilcoxon, 2004).

• Address the issue of vicarious trauma and burnout in a nonjudgmental way. Recognize that vicarious trauma is an occupational hazard of trauma work and de-stigmatize it (Warshaw & Pease, 2010). Perlman & Caringi (2009) emphasize that neither providers nor the people they serve are to blame for vicarious trauma. Rather, it is a cost of doing trauma work.

• Provide supervision, consultation and plenty of opportunities for debriefing. Staff meetings, supervision and consultation can help people begin to identify ways they are being affected and develop strategies to deal with them, like fostering self-care routines (WCSAP, 2004).

• Pay attention to special training needs. Younger, less experienced workers may need more training since research suggests that they tend to be more vicariously traumatized than more experienced workers (WCSAP, 2004).

• Limit the size of caseloads. Limiting the number of multi-abuse trauma survivors on a staff member’s caseload can help reduce feelings of being overwhelmed (Trippany, Kress & Wilcoxon, 2004). Research shows trauma workers indicate less work-related stress with a moderate number of individuals on a weekly caseload than with higher numbers.

• Create policies that encourage self-care. Policies allowing flexible work schedules and mandating that staff use compensatory and annual leave in a timely manner provide opportunities to rest and to process and integrate the efforts of the work (Perlman & Caringi, 2009). Provide adequate vacation, sick time and personal leave time. Benefits

An advocate who has been in the field for several years points out:

“We got hired because they thought we could do the job. When there’s competition, or people checking up on each other, or gossip, those kinds of things really tear at the healthy work environment.”
such as paid vacation time and insurance policies covering the cost of counseling are also helpful (Trippany, Kress & Wilcoxon, 2004). Cindy Obtinario of New Beginnings in Seattle, WA, says:

“You need a supervisor who, if you’re not taking care of yourself, instead of saying, ‘Good job for pushing through and filling out all those papers,’ will say, ‘You’ve done a good job and in fact you’re exemplary, but we’re worried about your longevity here because you haven’t taken any vacation. It’s time for you to take some vacation’” (Obtinario, 2010).

• Create a respectful working environment for both staff and the people the agency serves. How staff and supervisors interact with each other models the use of power in relationships. An abusive workplace sends an entirely wrong message. Gene Brodland, a licensed clinical social worker with the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, says:

“A good work environment will have more leadership than management. The micromanager is watching to catch somebody doing something wrong. The leader tries to catch somebody doing something right” (Brodland, 2010).

References


