

Transforming
Vicarious Trauma:
Self-Care for Caregivers

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Goals

- To understand what is meant by the process of “vicarious trauma” (VT)
- To engage in self-reflection and self-assessment about the impact
- To begin to conceptualize coping strategies to work proactively with sources of strain

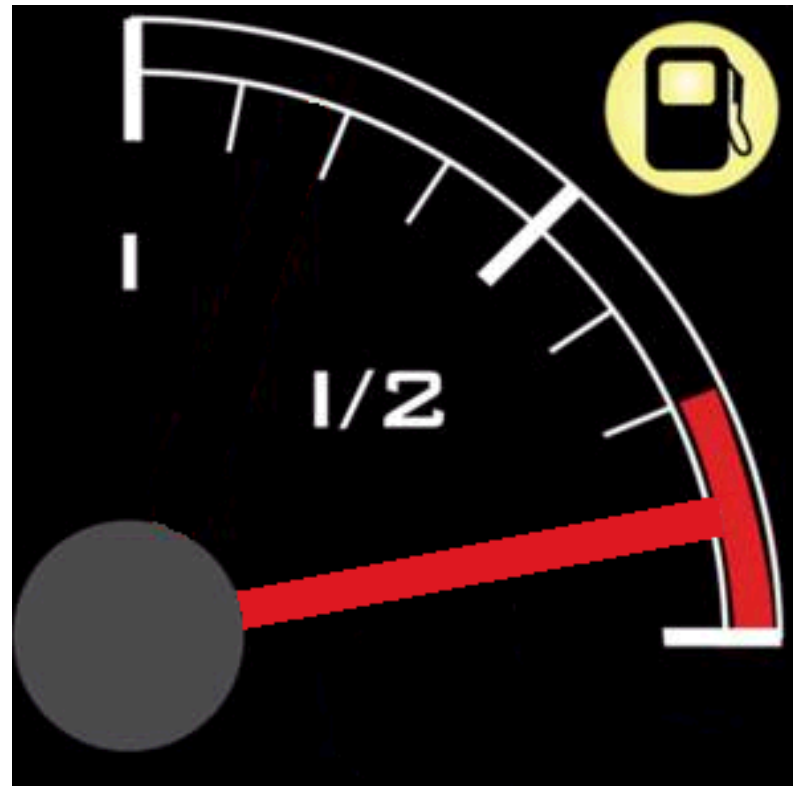


Vicarious Trauma (VT)

- *Vicarious Trauma is the process of change that happens because you care about the people you serve. Over time, this can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual life that also affect your family, your organization, and your patients/clients.*

Pearlman, L.A. & McKay, L. (2008). Understanding and addressing vicarious trauma. www.heading-institute.org

Self-Diagnostic Check: How Are You Today?



Mindfulness Reflection Exercise

- Who were you when you decided to be a public health caregiver?
- How have the stories you've heard and the suffering you've witnessed affected you?





Risk Factors

- Early career and later career risks may vary
- Greater similarity to patients served and/or personal trauma history
- Volume and severity of patient presentations
- Personal temperament
- Higher levels of life stress
- Not yet fully developed personal coping repertoire, support systems, and spiritual beliefs
- Organizational context unsupportive



Common Adverse Effects

■ Body/Physiological:

- Insomnia
- Fatigue, exhaustion
- Numbness, body disconnection
- Appetite and weight changes
- General somatic distress and poor health
- Hypervigilance: constantly on-guard for danger

■ Emotional/Feeling:

- Feeling shocked or horrified
- Persistent unwanted emotional overwhelm including sadness, anxiety, and/or irritability
- Numbness and emotional overdetachment
- Absence of positive emotions: happiness, humor, enjoyment.



■ Thoughts/Beliefs:

- Repetitive, obsessive thoughts or images
- Distracted, forgetful
- Rigid, black-or-white thinking
- Loss of ideals can lead to depression, despair, and pessimism
- Negatively-altered beliefs about the self, others, and the world (themes: meaninglessness, fear, distrust).

■ Behavior:

- Isolate professionally and/or personally
- Avoid reminders of what is painful or uncomfortable
- Inflexibility or “over-flexibility” of boundaries
- Conflicts with others where attributions and anger may be displaced
- Imbalanced work contribution: over or under.



Are VT Effects All Bad?

- How has this work strengthened you?
- What meaning do you derive from serving others who have been hurt?
- What lessons have you learned about survival, resilience, and positive transformation? (“vicarious resilience”)



The Best Coping Plans . . .

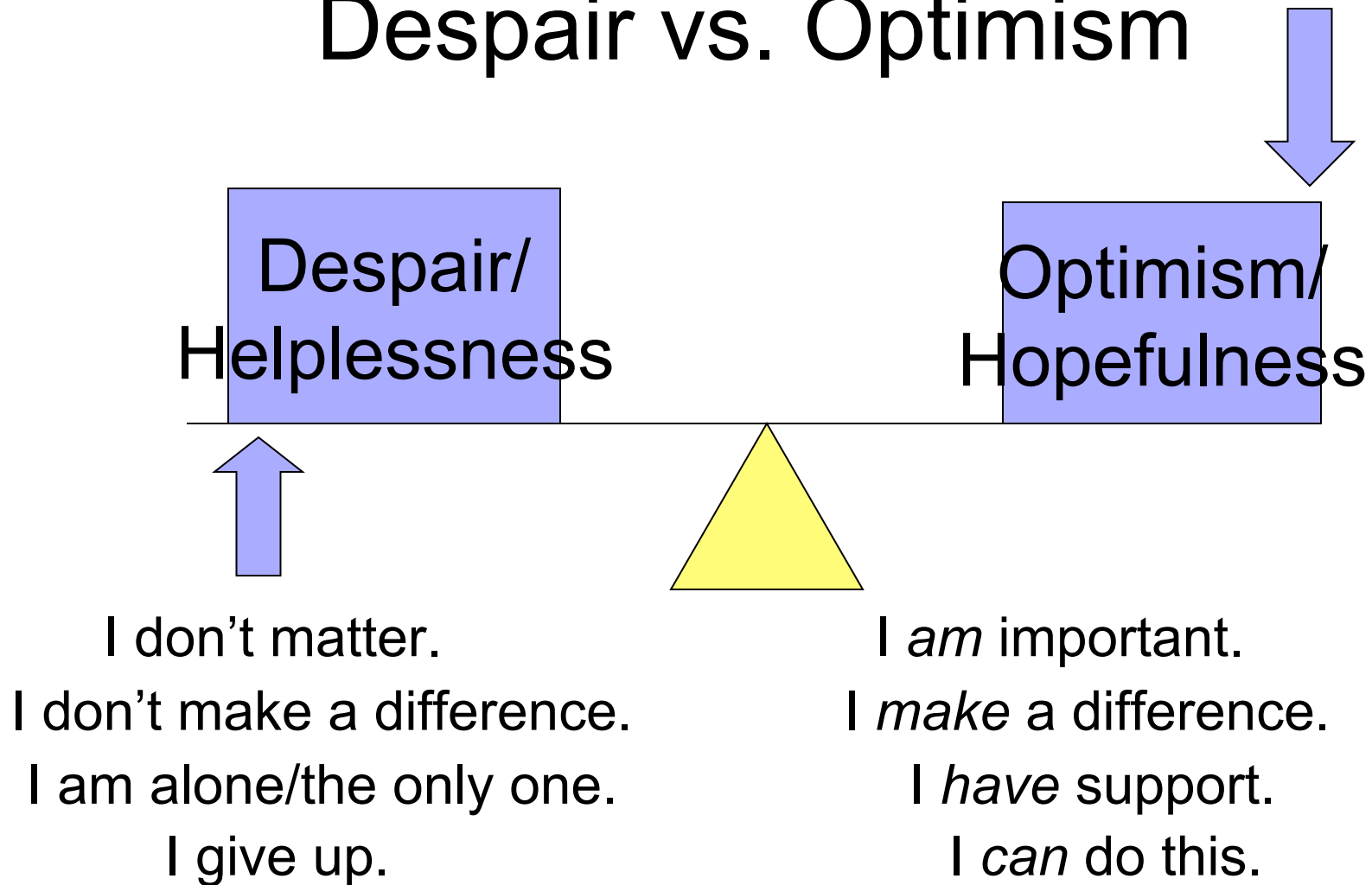
- Respect your temperament, preferences, reactions, and lifestyle, all of which change over time.
- Involve active strategies that require investment of your time and energy even when you feel you have neither.
- Balance:
 - **Escape**: Simply getting away physically, mentally
 - **Rest**: Activities with no goal or timeline
 - **Play**: Fun, creative, positive energy.



Additional Coping Tips

- Daily rituals that take only a moment can be helpful
- Building and reaching out to social supports that understand the strain you are under and support you in ways you prefer
- Coaching and praising self: gentleness, affirmation, acceptance, positive reframing
- Creation of strong organizational culture

The Struggle for Meaning: Despair vs. Optimism



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