



**Strand<sup>2</sup> Squared**

A Paradigm Shift Solution

### **Holistic Professional Wellness: Beyond Vicarious Trauma**

This presentation pairs well with: Mitigating Organizational trauma and toxic work environments and/or: Human Centric, Trauma Responsive Leadership

Working with victims and families who have undergone significant trauma will affect every person who works with high stress and trauma in a significantly traumatic and profoundly personal way. When discussing the type of work that we do (the process of working with the pain of others), neuroscientists have observed that the neurons in our brain do not recognize the difference between *the pain we feel for others* and the *pain we experience ourselves*. As much as we try, we cannot avoid a negative and personal impact from working with those who have experienced trauma, pain and tragedy- we can only mitigate it.

Helping professionals receive vicarious trauma (or compassion fatigue) on a regular basis – often times without understanding the impact of cumulative vicarious trauma and often without institutionalized support. The science is crystal clear, our brains and our lives are changed by the work we do. This is problematic because our clients are fragile and in need of healthy, experienced and well-educated staff, without which we risk secondary victimization. Thus, **self-care and professional health are ethical obligations**.

Further, it is not just Vicarious Trauma that impacts our professional health. Because of vicarious trauma, our work environments often become toxic. If trauma is not discharged in a “healthy way”, it will discharge sideways. Gossip, rumor making, mobbing (when staff and/or volunteers “gang-up” and bully or push out another volunteer or staff), victim blaming and/or slut shaming. We also suffer from burn-out. We are overwhelmed, underfunded and short staffed while working with an incredible amount of consistent violence on the daily basis. We know how important our work is, so we spread ourselves very thin. There is demoralization. We try find justice and seek offender accountability, but our systems are not functioning well. It is easy to become demoralized.

Finally, helping professionals often mistake “Self- Comfort” (behaviors that immediately feel good, but have long term negative consequences, i.e. smoking, drinking, discharging against co-workers...) for “Self-Care (behaviors that have long term positive consequences like yoga, exercise and time off- but don’t immediately feel good).

This session will explore the many ways in which vicarious trauma is received and processed by most human beings and how trauma impacts all of us and the ones we care about. We will look at the many variables compounding workplace trauma. Participants will be given practical information and guidance on how to recognize cumulative trauma and avoid the devastating effects on personal health and happiness. We will also look at professional health as it fits within the trauma informed paradigm and how agencies can institutionalize health as an ethical way to prevent secondary victimization.

Finally, this presentation will also draw out the ethical responsibility of maintaining a healthy self. It is essential that people who work with vulnerable populations are able to draw boundaries, be healthy, be grounded, and to practice mindfulness.

#### **Learning Objectives:**

- Recognize the personal impact of vicarious trauma
- Recognize the other dynamics impacting professional health
- Understand the principles of holistic self-care
- Develop strategies to cultivate professional health on the individual level
- Illustrate how organizations and agencies can, and should, institutionalize professional health