

Coping with trauma: A social justice law student's guide



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When working in social justice you will come across clients who have trauma backgrounds which impact them (see Trauma Informed Lawyering workshop for skills for working with clients with trauma). Social justice work can also feel overwhelming and can bring a sense of disempowerment about effecting change in systems.

Clients' trauma and systemic disempowerment can impact you. This workshop will:

- raise awareness of the impact of clients' trauma on you
- raise awareness of the impact of disempowerment
- introduce coping strategies to prevent or regulate your reactions, maintaining positive mental health, which in turn supports your ability to lawyer and help your clients
- provide resources to support your coping strategies

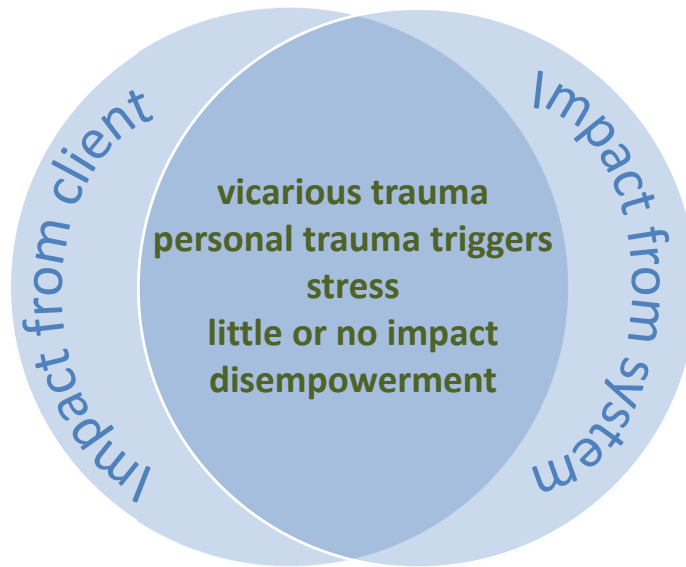
What is trauma?

Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that:

- overwhelms an individual's ability to cope
- causes feelings of helplessness
- diminishes sense of self
- diminishes ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences

definition

Social justice impacts on law students



Client trauma impacts on law students



Interacting (listening to, reading or watching) with stories of trauma can:

- result in vicarious trauma reactions within you
- trigger any personal trauma you may have experienced in the present or past
- be extremely stressful (without vicarious trauma or triggering)
- have little or no impact

Paige Marvel
2L

“You know that feeling when you’re reading for criminal law and the sexual assault and murder cases start to really get to you? You feel triggered, but you don’t understand why because you’re sitting at the safety of your desk with a coffee in hand. This is VICARIOUS TRAUMA”.

vicarious
trauma

- the impact of exposure from bearing witnesses to trauma stories
- can cause the same reactions in the listener as if you have experienced the trauma: lack of energy, feeling of disconnection, withdrawal, increased sensitivity to violence, despair and hopelessness, changes in identity - world view – spirituality, nightmares, intrusive imagery.

personal
trauma
triggers

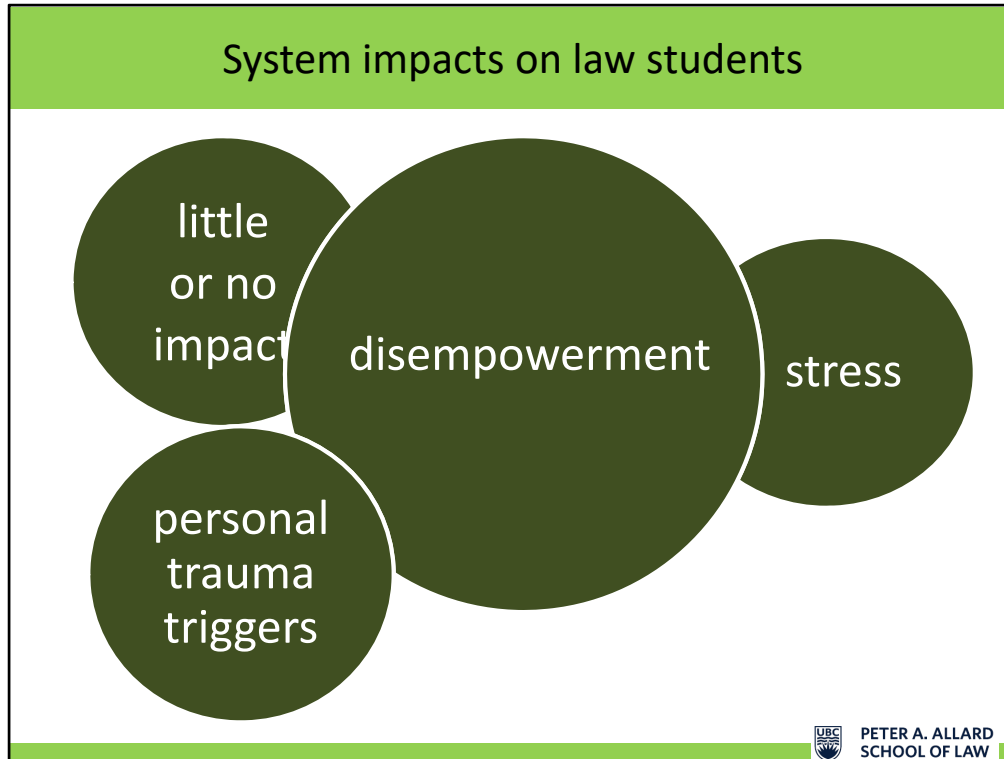
- for those who have experienced trauma, traumatic material can trigger emotions and memories of the event - past or present.

stress

- wear and tear we experience trying to cope with our environment
- symptoms can be physical, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional, such as: Fatigue, apathy, trouble sleeping, lack of concentration, crankiness, irritability, reactive, poor memory, lowered immune response, digestive problems, headaches, etc.

No
impact

- may have no impact - “Is there something wrong with me?”
- may have resilience and strategies already in place
- you do not need to be impacted to care or do your job



Overwhelming systemic issues in social justice can impact students who have to work within this system. The impact can be:

- similar to that impacted by client trauma:
 - stress
 - little or no impact
 - personal trauma triggers of experiences with systems past and present
- a sense of disempowerment



disempowerment

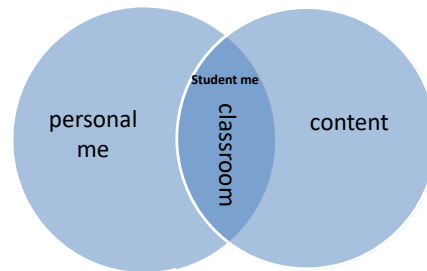
- taking away power from an individual, thus leaving them feeling helpless, without control over their lives.
- a process in which people lose the feeling or idea that they can influence their surroundings and the direction of events.
- Results in lack of motivation, anxiety, depression, vulnerability, low self esteem, learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness is a state that occurs after a person has experienced a stressful situation repeatedly. They come to believe that they are unable to control or change the situation, so they do not try — even when opportunities for change become available.

Coping strategies – proactive

- Establish boundaries
- Contain what is yours and what is content
- Engagement without enmeshment (be objective)
- Self care - diet, exercise, social support, sleep, wellbeing
- Balance energy
- Counselling

- The Table
- Breathing
- Relationship circles



Be proactive to build resiliency - When you know you maybe triggered or content will be difficult: regulation and processing – journaling ,breathing, meditation etc

- balance energy
 - Activity during the day takes energy, especially activity which is stressful or traumatic, remember to balance this energy out with relaxaing or energizing energy back into the body, so you feel balanced and have energy to keep going. You may have to check in with yourself and your energy level, and if you know you have something difficult to do during the day, take time to prepare by building energy before and replacing energy after the event.
- the Table
 - Imagine a table between you and anyone you have an interaction with. Imagine that anything that person says to you comes out of their mouth and lies on the table between you. You can leave the words and emotions there on the table. Look at it on the table, take a breath, give yourself time (stop), and think about what the words mean. Are they true? False? How would it make you feel to accept? To decline? You can pick up the words but leave the emotions behind. You can say that's their opinion: "I agree" or "I disagree" How differently do you feel for stopping to think about it before you accept what people say? Your feelings now are different from you immediate response. Using this visualization proactively helps you to be objective within your relationship circles. "Leave it on the table"
- relationship circles
 - Refers to the diagram where you only bring the part of yourself into the circle that is appropriate for the activity – e.g., at work you bring in your professional you, and leave your personal you out of the circle of interaction.

Coping strategies – in the moment

- Be aware
- Take a break
- Grounding techniques:
 - Affirmation
 - “It’s on The Table” “its on the classroom” “This is content only”
 - Breathing
 - PMR - Tense/release muscles
 - Mindfulness (see, hear, smell, taste, touch)
 - Thought stop
 - Remind self of role and boundaries
 - Drink some water

As it is happening

Coping strategies – after

- Process:
 - Talk with your professor, or friend
 - Debrief with a counsellor (Student Wellbeing Counsellor, LAPBC, EmpowerMe)
- Self care that night



Coping strategies – disempowerment

- Regulate emotion (as described in previous slides)
- Identify and remember goals for now:
 - Finish clinic, graduate as a lawyer
- Look to where you can effect change right now
- Identify what change you would like to see in the system and create an action plan of how this may be achieved:
 - Seek support
 - Seek guidance
 - Look for options

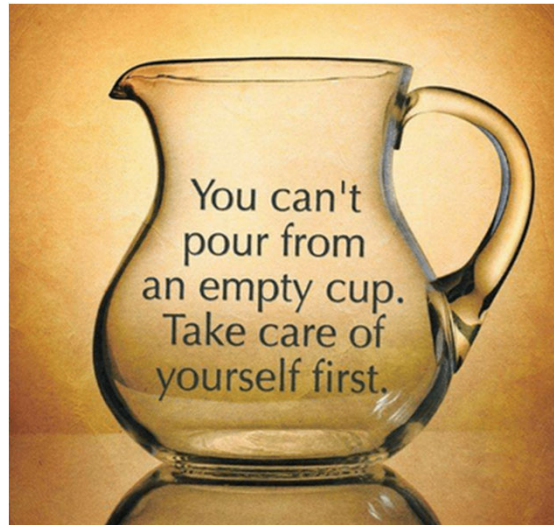
What is going right?

Review and reflect
What is going well
Strengths based
Do more of this



True for those who are not experiencing any impact, are stressed, triggered, or experiencing vicarious trauma.
What are my strengths??

Caring for others



Be thoughtful and compassionate to others' emotional responses and check in with them
Check in with self as well afterwards and do self care

Counselling Resources

- Anna Kline, Student Wellbeing Counsellor, Allard Hall, Rm 147b
604.822.4928 | kline@allard.ubc.ca
- EmpowerMe 1.844.741.6389 - 24/7
- Here2Talk 1.877.857.3397 – 24/7
- LAPBC 1.888.685.2171 - 24/7

- What is counselling? Could be a debrief, learning strategies, personal growth, processing triggers, trauma work (long term – specialist referral)
- Remote access for Anna is best through email
- EmpowerMe – ubc student community service - short term counselling
- Here2Talk – BC post secondary student counselling service – single session
- LAPBC – lawyer/law student BC counselling service – longer term counselling



Any questions or comments
please direct to Anna at
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