Vicarious Trauma and Self Care for CDR Teams
August 2013
Our work is HARD
Vicarious trauma

- People who respond to other people’s trauma can themselves be traumatized
- Also called “compassion fatigue” or “secondary trauma”
- Similar to “burnout” but not the same
  - Burnout is often related to work
It’s real

- Vicarious trauma is not just something you “feel”
- It’s an actual change to your brain brought on by trauma and by what your brain perceives as threat or stress
- It’s like a transfer of the emotion of the victim to you
- It can come out as biological, psychological, and/or social dysfunction
Trauma is real, and because it is, there are things that can be done to mitigate it

- Develop **resiliency**
- Much research is being done about:
  - the neurology of resilience
  - the scientific and psychological basis of resiliency
  - training to develop/enhance it
Resiliency is not just “toughing it out” or trying to relax and not take the trauma seriously

- True resiliency is a learned behavior
- There are things we can do to learn it
How will I know if I am having vicarious trauma?

- Because our work will always make us sad because of the death of a child, we need to learn to recognize signs of something deeper or different
  - Changed behavior
  - Low energy
  - Alcohol consumption
  - Difficulty performing at work
How can our team take care of itself to avoid vicarious trauma and build resiliency?

Different teams have tried different strategies

• One team has a member who is a therapist trained in trauma-informed care who does a short exercise with the team at the end of each review

• Another team rotates among members the responsibility to say something at the end of each review that honors the children who have died
How can our team take care of itself to avoid vicarious trauma and build resiliency? (cont.)

- Take individual stress tests when you’re together as a team and then talk about what you find out
- There are many different techniques that you can take on as a team or do yourself
- Talk during meetings with each other about what you are going through
How can our team take care of itself to avoid vicarious trauma and build resiliency? (cont.)

- Breathing exercises
- Go through stress identification exercises together
- Invite a therapist or trainer skilled in building resiliency to work with your team
“Everybody on our team seems OK”

• The experience of Vicarious Trauma can come on you unexpectedly
  – At a conference I once heard an ER doc describe its onset: she could barely get out of bed; she was crying often; she didn’t want to go to work.
• A team ignores the possibility of Vicarious Trauma at its peril
• Vicarious Trauma has been associated through research with poor support from one’s colleagues, so strong support from colleagues should therefore be a protective factor
Questions for discussion:

• Does anybody want to discuss their own experience with Vicarious Tauma?
• Does your team do anything to take care of yourselves?
• Do you have ideas about what you might do?
Next steps

- The National Center is forming a work group to work on Vicarious Trauma and self care.
- If you have ideas about what we could do to help teams with this issue, please be sure to let us know.