

How is your work affecting you?

16 Warning Signs of a Trauma Exposure Response

It is perfectly normal to have a response when exposed to trauma work. Our response means we still have the capacity to connect internally with the external reality. Whether you identify with one, a few, or many of the warning signs, know that your awareness and curiosity can lead to more insight and compassion for yourself, your clients, and your work. As you move through this handout, pay special attention to how you feel, while honoring the courage it takes to look honestly at yourself and your behavior.

Consider sharing this with a trusted support person.

MINIMIZING

- Does it take a more intense level of suffering to get your attention?
- Do you consider less extreme experiences of trauma 'less' real and therefore less deserving of your time and support?
- Do you downplay anything that does not fall into the 'most extreme' category of hardship?

FEELING HELPLESS/HOPELESS

- Do you frequently ask yourself if you are making an impact?
- Do you ask yourself what's the point?
- Is it difficult to see that any progress is being made for a positive change?
- Do you feel overwhelmed, as if nothing can remedy the situation?
- Do you believe things are plunging into greater despair?
- Are your successes hard to keep in focus?

INABILITY TO EMBRACE COMPLEXITY

- Do you participate in cliques, gossip, and have rigid expectations of other workers?
- Do you crave clear signs of right and wrong; good and bad – while feeling the urgent need to choose sides?
- Are you more likely to say 'no', and be more opinionated?
- Do you look to take side in a debate no matter what the debate is about?

HYPERVIGILANCE

- Are you completely focused on your job, to the extent that being present for anything else in your lives can seem impossible?
- Do you feel like you are always "on", even in times where nothing can be, or should be done?

A SENSE ONE CAN NEVER DO ENOUGH

- Is there a feeling of urgency in the workplace?
- Do you ask yourself: Am I good enough? Tough enough? Smart enough?
- Do you believe you are not doing enough and you should be doing more?

CHRONIC EXHAUSTION/PHYSICAL AILMENTS

- Do you believe that you have no choice about the work that you do?
- Does your workplace culture imply that fatigue is an accepted aspect of the seasoned worker's demeanor?
- Do you have a bone-tired, soul-tired, heart-tired kind of exhaustion – your mind is tired, your body is tired, and your spirit is tired?

INABILITY TO LISTEN/ AVOIDANCE

- Is the highlight of your workday when you don't have to do your job?
- Has avoidance begun to show up in your personal life?
- Do you avoid answering phone calls?

GUILT



- Do you ever feel guilty about finding things in life pleasurable when clients you work with are suffering?
- Does guilt distract you from being present in your life?
- Are you unable to find joy in life, largely due to guilt associated with how we live in a world with such disparities in resources, and privilege?

ANGER AND CYNICISM



- Do you know how your anger looks to others/your support system/your partner?
- Is your humor in the work place responsible or cynical? A cynical sense of humor can be an effort to cope with anger.

DISSOCIATED MOMENTS



- Have you lost track of moments in your work because something someone said has unhinged you?
- Do you have difficulty staying present?
- Do you ever forget the last five sentences you have spoken, or find yourself not hearing the last part of what someone has shared?

ADDICTIONS



- Do you use alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, other distractions to check out?
- Are you addicted to the rush of adrenaline?
- Do you have a desire to stay wired so you don't have to slow down and really feel what is going on within and around you?
- Are you working all the time?

GRANDIOSITY



- Do you feel that your work is so incredibly important and so are you?
- Do you ask yourself who else would/could do this job if I'm not here?
- Is work becoming the center of your identity?

INABILITY TO EMPATHIZE/NUMBING



- After becoming overwhelmed do you have difficulty:
 - experiencing any type of emotion?
 - regulating emotion?
 - crying at a TV commercial?
 - yelling at the dog/colleague/family member?
- Do you have numbed out intense feelings because you are scared and feel out of control?

FEAR



- Does bearing witness to the suffering of others bring to light the dangers of the world?
- Do you have a fear of intense feelings or personal vulnerability?

SENSE OF PERSECUTION



- Do you have feelings of profound lack of efficacy in your work and/or life?
- Do you become convinced that others are responsible for your well-being, and that we lack the ability to transform our circumstances?

DIMINISHED CREATIVITY



- Do you get bored with what you're doing in your work?
- Do you feel stagnant in your ability to be innovative?
- Are you experiencing a decrease of joy in your life?
- Do you crave more structure and less creativity?