

## CHAPTER THREE

### What Is Trauma Exposure Response?

It was not until last week, after being gone months and after going and picking herbs day after day and making tinctures, that I could think again like myself. It really scared me because I wasn't sure I was going to ever come back.

Mo O'Brien, a street medic who helped create one of the first medical clinics in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

If we are to do our work with suffering people and environments in a sustainable way, we must understand how our work affects us. We need to undertake an honest assessment of how our feelings or behaviors have changed in response to whatever trauma we have been exposed to. Generally speaking, a trauma exposure response may be defined as the transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings or the planet. This transformation can result from deliberate or inadvertent exposure, formal or informal contact, paid or volunteer work. When we refer to trauma exposure response, we are talking about the ways in which the world looks and feels like a different place to you as a result of your doing your work.

Because trauma exposure hits so close to home for so many people working in helping professions, it can be hard not to feel defensive or overwhelmed when learning about it. Acknowledging the presence of a trauma exposure response means recognizing that things are definitely *not* how we'd like them to be in our lives. In most cases, if we hope to alleviate the situation, change must occur on a fundamental level. For someone already stressed to her or his limit, this can be frightening or feel like an impossible task.

Evaluating our response to trauma exposure is critical, because how we are impacted by our work in the present directly affects our work in the future. Our relationship with our work influences our inner life as well as our experiences with others. It can set in motion a cycle of damage that, if not for our awareness, can overtake our whole lives.

A trauma exposure response has occurred when external trauma becomes internal reality. When this happens as a result of our work, it can catch us off guard. Indeed, the thought that the pain around us can actually change our own psychological and physiological responses, altering our worldview, may never have occurred to us. We often assume that our very status as helpers grants us immunity from the suffering we witness. We are often wrong.

Laurie Leitch, a researcher, educator, and cofounder of the Trauma Resource Institute, which specializes in the impact of trauma on the nervous system, went to work in Thailand after the 2004 tsunami. She was struck by how many workers arrived in a “heroic mode,” in which they were exceptionally open to those they had come to help. “As you care for people with your heart wide open, you often don’t realize how much of what you are exposed to is being taken in and held in your body. It isn’t until later that your body starts to let you know. I thought I was fine over there, until I got home and had nightmares, headaches, and was so irritable. We need to appreciate the impact of humanitarian work not just on the psyche but on the entire nervous system.”

In a recent study, the first in an emerging research area, Brian Bride of the University of Georgia found that exposure to others’ trauma doubles the risk that social workers will experience post-traumatic stress disorder. He found numerous indicators of secondary trauma and illuminated the fact that while the rate of secondary trauma among social workers is high, their awareness of trauma’s effects on them is low. “Social workers may hear about burnout, and they may hear about self-care,” Bride says, “but they’re not hearing about secondary post-traumatic stress disorder.”

When we focus on our trauma exposure response, what exactly does it look like? What are the specifics? In the next chapter, we’ll survey 16 common consequences of trauma exposure. These results

often occur on a continuum: Some changes are very slight and may not even be noticed by you or your friends, while others may be dramatic and life changing. Different people will experience the consequences of trauma exposure in very different ways. Still, patterns do emerge, and they can help us to recognize and address our response.

While our feelings or behavior may be quite evident, it may nonetheless be difficult to identify trauma exposure as their cause. During an interview with American correspondent Ray Suarez on National Public Radio, Desmond Tutu, the South African archbishop and anti-apartheid activist, provided a striking example of how difficult it can be to stay present to our own responses even when our experience of trauma is indirect. He described a chilling scene that took place during South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. He was working closely with a woman whose job was to record the oral testimony. At one point, she looked down to see her hands drenched with her tears. She had no knowledge of her own weeping, even as she continued typing the detailed testimonies.

Just like that stenographer, many of us develop coping mechanisms that serve us extremely well—in the moment. Outside the moment of crisis, they may no longer provide any benefit. And yet, even with the passage of time, the changing of circumstances, and our own individual growth, we continue to employ our now-outdated coping skills. They are familiar to us, and we are experts at using them. We may even have inherited some of them from generations before us. But eventually they may reach a point where they are not just ineffective—they imprison us.

For many of us, the elaborate architecture we build around our hearts begins to resemble a fortress. We build up our defenses, but the trauma keeps on coming. We add a moat, we throw in some crocodiles, we forge more weapons, we build higher and higher walls. Sooner or later, we find ourselves locked in by the very defenses we have constructed for our own protection. We will find the key to our liberation only when we accept that what we once did to survive is now destroying us. And thus we begin the work of dismantling our fortress, releasing the crocodiles back to their habitat, and melting

down the weapons to recycle into plowshares. Rather than fend off life, we slowly train ourselves to open our hearts to everything that comes to the door.

In his book *Waking the Tiger*, Peter Levine, a pioneering researcher and psychologist in the trauma field and founder of the concept of somatic experiencing, writes, “Today, our survival depends increasingly on developing our ability to think rather than being able to physically respond. Consequently, most of us have become separated from our natural, instinctual selves—in particular, the part of us that can proudly, not disparagingly, be called animal. . . . The fundamental challenges we face today have come about relatively quickly, but our nervous systems have been much slower to change. It is no coincidence that people who are more in touch with their natural selves tend to fare better when it comes to trauma.”

As Levine suggests, we are often rewarded when we deny or displace our feelings. It is critical to remember that while aspects of our trauma exposure response may have served us in some capacity or may continue to serve us in some capacity, and may be socially and institutionally supported, we are exploring them from the standpoint of “How is this working for my deepest, most honest self? How is this working for those I serve? How is this sustainable? What is a more functional way to respond?”

Acknowledging a trauma exposure response can be difficult for any number of reasons. Many caregivers feel guilty for struggling with their work because, they tell themselves, who are they to complain about their lives? A conservation biologist working in Sierra Leone told me, “I never wanted to give my afflictions any credibility by acknowledging their impact on my life, as that would distract and detract from those who truly suffered.” Others may be convinced that they should be able to rise above all this and that feelings of distress are a sign of weakness.

Secretly, many of us may feel that if we admit to having a hard time, we will open a door that we won’t know how to shut. In organizations where toughness is promoted as a virtue, there may be a great deal of incentive to keep up our façade. As one community organizer told me, “I think we’re all fronting with how we’re doing.”

Being open to the existence of our trauma exposure response is

a critical step in trauma stewardship. I have no attachment to convincing you, the reader, that you are suffering from such exposure. I'm just encouraging you to explore the possibility of unexpected consequences from your work. Openness is critical. "There's liberation in reality," as the American jazz saxophonist Branford Marsalis has said.

By coming into the present moment again and again, we can gain crucial awareness of our trauma exposure response and, further, what would be helpful to us. The healing process may require a continuous effort to realize and re-realize that our trauma exposure response is not going away unless we give it proper attention. The sooner the better for this realization, since we are hoping to consider this from a preventive standpoint when possible, because, as those who are savvy in the ways of the human body will tell you, "by the time you're thirsty, you're already dehydrated." Cultivating awareness will allow us to gauge our thirst level and assess what we need to do about it. If we can recognize any of these shifts early, we can often limit their negative impact on our lives. Ignoring the red flags of a trauma exposure response is akin to ignoring the early rumblings of an avalanche or dismissing the signs for a dangerous cliff up ahead on the trail.

When I was a social worker in the trauma center at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, the Level 1 trauma center for the Pacific Northwest, I marveled at how some of the doctors could distance themselves from their feelings. When someone died, a doctor and a social worker went into a small room called "the quiet room" and the doctor conveyed the news to the patient's loved ones. He or she would answer any questions and then leave, and the social worker would remain with the family.

I remember feeling like I was in an altered reality as I saw the distant look in the doctors' eyes and heard the hollowness in their voices as they talked with families. While these things were deeply unsettling, I fully understood that if I had to choose between that doctor saving the life of someone I loved and that doctor being a compassionate, active listener, I'd choose the former. I knew that doctors and nurses trying desperately to help critically injured patients had to develop an immediate way of coping. And yet it was evident that this compartmentalizing and numbing was not wholly

sustainable. There was a personal and professional cost, both to the providers and to those around them.

Of course, people respond to trauma exposure in many ways that are not included in this book, but I have included the most common experiences in chapter 4. Again, a reminder: remain curious, take deep breaths, and maintain a sense of humor as you consider how this information applies to you. Only by understanding the topography of the land that you are lost in can you begin to plot the wisest way out.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The 16 Warning Signs of Trauma Exposure Response



As you make your way through the 16 signs of trauma exposure response, take note of how you feel. For some people I work with, the experience of analyzing their trauma exposure response can be quite unsettling. Recently, at a statewide cervical cancer conference where we were reviewing trauma exposure response, a participant leaned over to her colleague and said, “I swear she must have talked to my partner.” Her colleague responded, “Well, then she gets around, because she most certainly has talked to mine as well!” Some feel as if there’s an intervention being planned and they alone are at the center of it. Some worry that there is something wrong with them. Still others become immediately overwhelmed. I remind them, and I

would like to remind my readers, that whether you identify with many of the warning signs, a few, or none at all, you are more than okay. It is perfectly normal to have a response to trauma exposure. This means you still have the capacity to connect your internal world with the external reality, and this, as you know, is a great blessing. As hard as it is to feel our full range of feelings, still more damaging are our attempts to not feel. Even if we don't believe we have any trauma exposure response, what compassion and insight can we bring to those who do? As we move ahead, we can honor ourselves for having the courage to look honestly at our own behavior. Already, we have taken the first step toward more effective trauma stewardship.

### ***Feeling Helpless and Hopeless***

I have witnessed mass mortality of frogs in Panama, and we can now predict this disease's path, and to some degree its date of arrival. We can't do anything to stop it, or help the frogs in the wild. It is so incredibly unusual and unbelievable, and sad. We all believe we will continue to lose a lot more amphibian species before we get anywhere close to solving this.

Karen Lips, associate professor, University of Maryland  
Department of Biology

A person experiencing hopelessness or helplessness may wake up in the morning with that "Why am I even getting out of bed?" feeling. It may be hard to see that any progress is being made for positive social or environmental change. Victor Pantesco, a pioneering researcher of trauma's impact on conservationists and biologists, says this is often true for those who work in the field. "We're talking about people who are on the daily front lines of the planet, and they see the planet being affected in catastrophic ways, with a speed that crosses a threshold of manageability. They don't have an escape. It all just gets too big." Even though a person may be part of a very successful program, environmental or otherwise, the positive may be eclipsed and the negative exalted. Successes, markers of improvement, and the opportunities for growth can be hard to keep in focus. Instead, a person may believe only that things are plunging into greater despair

and chaos—locally, nationally, and worldwide. Personally, one may feel overwhelmed, as if nothing can remedy the situation. I lived in Guatemala, where the ravages of the war were still very present in people's lives. They frequently used the expression *No vale la pena*, which translates to "It's not worth the pain." That made a strong impression on me. I imagined that the expression had been born out of the prolonged sufferings of war and poverty, and that the people had an increased sense of what was worth the effort and what was not. It was as if they were already down to their last reserves of energy and hopefulness, and they weren't about to threaten their precious remaining resources by engaging with pain that might drain them still further.



*"My question is: Are we making an impact?"*

Kirsten Stade, an environmental scientist who also takes in foster dogs and cats, told me about her struggles with feelings of helplessness. "With the environmental work, I often succumb to a feeling of impotence, that any issue I work on, any awareness I raise, is just such an insignificant drop in the massive bucket of impending crisis. The work I do with animals brings its own unique challenges. On the one hand, this work is enormously rewarding because every act of animal

rescue has an immediate, tangible result: One life has been saved. The struggle comes from the knowledge, again, that whatever I do is pitifully inadequate to the task. So though every act of rescuing brings the knowledge of a life saved, it also brings the knowledge of countless lives not saved. This to me feels like personal failure.”

A Ph.D. candidate in ecology described another aspect of feeling hopeless and helpless. She began her work in the Peruvian Amazon in 1996, as a 21-year-old undergraduate, and continued it through graduate school. She said,

I grew up in northern Michigan and spent most of my free time playing in the woods and lakes but, also, as the daughter of journalists, was immersed in world news. I was incredibly idealistic and wanted to help make a difference. In Peru, the elders asked me to study and document community-based fisheries management. The national government views the community's efforts as illegal, while the people view local management as both a right and an immediate necessity to ensure that the resources upon which they depend continue into the future. They hoped that documenting some of the practices might help change national policy.

It was incredibly fulfilling work, but also very lonely and harrowing at times. Despite community efforts, the fishery had clearly begun to collapse, and in 1999 high floods led to actual starvation.

When I came home, I was severely depressed and diagnosed with vicarious traumatization. I told people that I felt like I had been banging my head against a brick wall and the only dents that had been made were in my now very bloody skull. The hardest thing for me, in general, is that I feel overwhelmed by the level of need, the lack of empowerment, and the fact that nothing I do seems to make a difference. I often end up wondering why I didn't study to be a doctor. I know that to some extent I am coping by not letting myself fully look things in the face at the moment, and I want to find a better path.

In the course of extensive research, Judy Garber and Martin E. P. Seligman identified three types of perceptions that contribute directly to feelings of helplessness among people in traumatic circum-

stances. First, individuals hold themselves personally responsible for a troubled situation even when no one could reasonably be expected to master it. Many workers can relate to this feeling: You know in your gut that there is only so much you can do, but you still feel responsible in some way. Second, individuals perceive that the traumatic event itself will be long-lived—they see no possibility of relief. This applies particularly to workers who view their work as their career and not a time-limited job. Unyielding focus on a single field may leave workers feeling in over their heads and unable to see even a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Third, individuals believe that they are likely to repeat their current struggles in another time and place. Workers who feel they are not functioning well in a specific trauma-related situation may imagine that they will experience the same difficulties in all similar situations. A person with such an attitude is likely to experience a greater sense of helplessness than someone who understands each situation to be a specific instance and not an indicator of future coping capacity.

A conversation I heard between two women who are friends and colleagues in post-Katrina New Orleans illustrates how overwhelming these feelings can be:

“I want to go home, but I don’t have a home to go home to—my daughters aren’t there, my neighbors aren’t there, my doctor’s not there.”

“I know it’s hard, but everything passes in time. You know, in 10 years this won’t seem so bad. I know that seems like a long time, but . . .”

“Yeah, that does feel like a long time. Right now, one day feels like a long time.”

**PROFILE VANCE VREDENBURG****SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA**

**CURRENTLY:** Assistant professor in the Department of Biology at San Francisco State University; cofounder and assistant director of AmphibiaWeb, an amphibian bioinformatics and conservation organization; research associate at the University of California, Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate

Zoology and at the California Academy of Sciences.

**FORMERLY:** Postdoctoral scholar, Department of Integrative Biology and Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, Berkeley.

I am an ecologist. My area of study is amphibian ecology, conservation, and evolution. I actually got started working in marine science, mostly fishes but also crustaceans, and I was once even hired as an algae specialist. My work over the past 20 years has taken me from Alaska to Antarctica, from the Caribbean to Guatemala and Mexico, and even as far as Asia. Although my passion now is studying amphibians, I began investigating them as an ecologist. I wasn't one of those kids who were chasing frogs from age four.

As an undergrad and for five years after, I studied sexual selection in marine fishes. When it came to graduate school, I looked for a project with more of a conservation angle. I wanted my scientific work to feed back directly to preserve this beautiful world we live in. I was lucky to find a project in the Sierra Nevada—in California. It's an amazing place to work. These natural parks and wilderness areas are some of our planet's most protected habitats, but it turns out that amphibians—frogs, toads, salamanders—have been disappearing even here. In the Sierra Nevada, we're talking about frogs who live in areas with no roads for hundreds of miles and who move maybe only a few hundred meters in their entire lives. So why are we losing them?

I came in as a conservation biologist at the time knowing little about amphibians. But when I began to study mountain yellow-legged frogs [a species listed as critically endangered], I tested an idea that others had totally brushed aside. I wanted to further explore this idea that the introduction of species was causing the decline of these frogs. People introduced trout into areas that historically had no fish, and the trout ate the frogs, but no one was there to watch it happen. I basically did classic ecological experiments to show that the introduction of nonnative trout has decimated frog populations in

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these supposedly pristine areas. The truth is that even our most protected areas have been greatly changed, sometimes in subtle ways, by humans. My research was really exciting, because in this time of worldwide amphibian decline there are next to no examples of frogs recovering after declines. In this case, I found that if you restored the habitat to its natural condition, the frogs rebounded and quickly, so imagine this ray of hope! It was just incredible.

The Park Service and other federal and state agencies quickly realized that this was a simple and elegant way to turn around these amphibian declines. They took my Ph.D. thesis and turned it into actual conservation action. Think about how meaningful this could be for these frogs—a graduate student's efforts scaled up to the level of federal and state agencies with many more resources to bring to the situation. Exactly what I was hoping to do with my life! And then just as the frogs were starting to recover, just as the conservation actions were implemented on a much larger landscape and things were turning around—just then I started finding first dozens and then tens of thousands of dead frogs. You can imagine what the effect was on me personally. After seven years of monitoring populations, conducting experiments, publishing papers, and proving to people that something could be done to help these amphibians, my colleagues and I started finding dead frogs. It turned out it was an emerging disease.

The impact was devastating. We had put in all that hard work. I could see a future where these amphibians could be restored to their original state and saved from extinction. Having the whole ecosystem revert to a more natural state was good not only for the frogs but for all the species in the food web. The interconnected web of life was suddenly moving back in the right direction—the algae, the plants, the frogs, the coyotes, the raven, the bears. And now all that was unraveling.

I was overtaken by a sense of doom that there really is nothing we can do to reverse this worldwide decline of species. I'd heard about this disease affecting amphibians in other places. I had thought, "It's not gonna happen here," but it did. It just destroyed me. There was this

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beautiful alpine lake that was home to populations I'd sat with for years while they were being restored. I remember sitting on the shoreline just crying my heart out amidst hundreds of dead frogs. I had gone from this positive position of feeling that we had the power to turn things around to realizing that I was absolutely powerless. I had been working on this single project for nine years, and suddenly entire populations went extinct in a matter of months. Looking out over that quiet landscape, I thought, "There may be a time not far away when they are all extinct, and there's nothing I can do about it." I felt like I wanted to jump off a cliff or something, because the spirit had just dropped out of me. I had an emotional connection to these really beautiful animals that I personally had helped by giving their habitat back. I had seen this vibrant life return to this area and now I was seeing it all disappear and I couldn't do anything. I can't really describe the feeling—it was like floating back down to earth. I went from, wow, humans can do these great things and people are lining up to help to . . . nada, worthless. That was really, really, really hard.

So what in the world is going on with this disease? I finally picked myself up and found a bunch of smart people to write a proposal with, and we got funded by the National Science Foundation to go and find out why this is causing such massive mortality. It's the worst case in recorded history of a disease driving species to extinction. And it jumps between species of amphibians. Some might ask, "Who cares?" Well, I care because I care about amphibians, but everyone should care. Think about it: If this type of deadly disease got into a human population or into the organisms that we depend on for our survival (corn, rice, wheat, cattle, poultry), it would be catastrophic. There is very good reason to keenly understand a disease like this. Why is it killing amphibians, how is it spreading, is there a way to slow down the effects? There are a lot of big questions that are very interesting purely for science but also for conservation and for our general understanding of emerging diseases. Hundreds of species of amphibians have gone extinct because of this disease. The one hopeful thing we've found is that some species are surviving, so we're looking at the coexistence between the deadly fungus and those

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species. We still don't have any solid answers, but we do know more than we did four or five years ago.

I have traveled to Mexico and Guatemala and am working with colleagues in Sri Lanka, Madagascar, the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, and China to see if it's killing species and where. Back in the Sierra Nevada I'm trying out techniques to slow down the effects of the disease and to help the frogs survive the epidemic. Two years ago I got permission from the National Park Service to go treat some frogs in an epidemic using an antifungal bath. So far, it looks like it worked. I'm trying to convince the Park Service to try this on a bigger scale with more populations that lie in the path of this disease. Several researchers are also working with zoos to try to get in front of these waves of mortality and save some of these species before they go extinct. We are bringing a few individuals into captivity to keep them safe. We're trying to get them to breed so that some day we can reintroduce them to the wild, but this is uncharted territory and no one knows if it will be successful. This is unbelievable, how much destruction this disease has caused. It's like nothing we've ever seen before.

I'm linking up with researchers all around the world to look at this problem. When calamities happen, folks all over the planet come together. That's what's going on in the scientific community. It's such a dramatic and dangerous thing that rivalries have gone away and people are coming together and sharing information and trying to figure out what we can do.

I just coauthored a paper with David Wake that has gotten a lot of press because it concludes that the amphibians are signaling that we are entering the sixth mass extinction of life on Earth. In the history of life on Earth there have been five mass extinctions, or periods of time where life on Earth nearly went extinct. The most drastic one, the Permian-Triassic Extinction, occurred 250 million years ago, and 95 percent of life on Earth went extinct. By the way, amphibians survived that one! We think that right now we're entering another phase of mass extinction, and the amphibians are the sentinels. They are telling us that something is wrong. More than a third of the world's

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6,300 amphibian species are threatened with extinction. It's disheartening, to say the least. Good god, what's going to happen? We have one earth, and there's nowhere else to live. People tend to forget that. It's difficult to look at bad news, but you can't put this aside. In my job I'm confronted with it on a daily basis. I'm studying this group of organisms that has been around for 300 million years, and right now as I'm watching them, in my short life, they're going extinct.

Sometimes I'd like to go work on something happy, like a children's film for Pixar, but instead I work on gloom and doom. I got into this because I love nature and I care about our world. I feel absolutely privileged to be in these beautiful places with these gorgeous animals, but watching them struggle and die in my hands is the saddest thing I've ever seen. I've always had this idea that if I ever had children, I'd take them up and show them these amazing frogs. Now what am I going to do? Is there going to be any place left or are they just going to see it on a computer screen? And that is a horrible thought. I see so much beauty in life, but when I see species disappearing, I wonder what is going to be left. I don't want to be Mr. Grim, but that's what I'm confronted with. Sometimes I just get really sad. Science is about facts, and there's no avoiding the truth.

The conservation side of our field has grown by leaps and bounds, and we are all trying to study different angles of this problem. People have come together and collaborated in a way no one did in the past. There's also this impending doom. The older generation of scientists talk about places all over the world that used to be full of amphibians, and they talk about all the wonderful night hikes they'd go on and you go there now and there's nothing there. At many sites, over 40 percent of the species are gone forever. In Costa Rica, at the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, there used to be over 20 species of amphibians. Today you are lucky if you see one. I feel robbed on some level. If something is extinct, there's nothing you can do about it. There are plenty of stories from older scientists that talk about what they'd seen and how abundant this salamander or that frog was, and you go out at night these days and it's completely silent because there's not a single amphibian calling.

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Scientists aren't supposed to feel very much. We like talking about data and facts and hypotheses. We don't usually talk about feelings, especially not when we're in a crowd, but with this topic you hear the sadness and despair come through. It creeps out during scientific talks. There's a silence in the room and you can feel it. Before this doom and gloom came, people at meetings would get together and talk about new findings. Now there's a lot of talk about what has been lost and what is going to be hit next and what can be done. The tone has changed from excitement and discovery to bewilderment and sadness.

It's really hard to be enthusiastic about getting other people to study amphibians when I know that eventually they'll hit this sad truth. I hope I don't lose it so badly that I don't want to encourage people to get excited about science and research and nature, but it's pretty hard. When grad students ask to work in my lab, I think, "Are they going to be able to deal with the animals dying?" I never thought about that before. I used to feel much more hope that we could turn things around. Now, with things happening at the worldwide level, I think some of the problems are insurmountable. That's a big, big change for me. I try to stay positive and focused on the few cases where we might make a difference. I think we're poised to turn things around in the U.S., at least culturally. We can use education to teach people to keep biodiversity in mind. That is very important to us changing things.

I don't know that there's a good way to find peace with this. Realizing that bad things happen is an understanding that is part of life, but I always thought that bad things could be turned around. With extinction there's nothing left to fix. There may be a fundamental lesson about hopelessness, but I had never let it sink in.

I try to tell myself that even though I haven't seen it, there must be something we can do. Maybe there's a way we won't lose everything. I tell myself, let me quickly learn what I can right now. The whole scientific community feels this way. It's such a crisis that the scientific community is willing to do things now that we wouldn't have been willing to do 10 years ago. We're now trying riskier things. Science is becoming more flexible. A few years ago, we

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thought if we couldn't get a research paper out of it, we were wasting our time. Now we're like, "Screw it, we'll do it anyway." We need the agencies that fund science to allow more flexibility.

I feel a sense of pressure that goes well beyond having to turn in my next report, to get a manuscript published, or to get this research done. The pressure is phenomenal. I had no idea how much pressure there is. I feel like I need 10 copies of myself to keep up, and it's not even close to being enough. Extinction is really forever. I can't stress how much weight that puts on my life. Sometimes I wake up at three in the morning thinking about all I need to do to move this research forward. It's not for my career—that doesn't even matter. It's that feeling of despair and sense that we've got to do something! This is the last breath of air and you've got to do everything you can, or you're not going to make it back up to the surface. It's like this not just for me, but for everyone in my field. And you don't want to live life that way all the time. ☀

## ***A Sense That One Can Never Do Enough***

It's not a feeling, it's true. If I don't do it, it's not going to get done, and if it doesn't get done, people die. I can never do enough.

Attorney for inmates sentenced to capital punishment



*"We just haven't been flapping them hard enough."*

The belief that "I am not doing enough and I should be doing more" is widespread and often a powerful influence on our lives. Often, this belief dates back to the early years of our lives. As children, what messages did we receive about sustainability and longevity? Did we get the word that "It's a long road—take good care of yourself, prioritize your health and your well-being"? Or did the repeated messages lead us to internalize the oppressive lesson that "No matter what you do or how you do it, it won't be enough"?

Nobody is immune from circumstances that instill a sense of inadequacy. Almost everyone has had to withstand negative teachings to some degree. At the same time, certain people are likely to receive these lessons more often and in more ways than others. Many of us are members of one or more social groups for which the oppressive

messages are continually reinforced.

We can view this notion of scarcity and “not enough-ness” from a larger framework of systematic oppression. Oppression is most commonly felt and expressed as a widespread, if unconscious, belief that a certain group of people are inferior. We often attribute such bias to individuals. But when such feelings as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism are codified into law or integrated into the functioning of social systems, this becomes systematic oppression.

The most obvious forms of oppression typically begin with the denigration and dehumanization of certain individuals or groups. This may escalate to scapegoating, which may in turn lead to aggression against the targeted parties that can take many forms—from individual violence to government legislation. When the victims of oppression come to believe the misinformation used to denigrate or dehumanize them, the result is “internalized oppression.” Ultimately, internalized oppression can drive members of targeted groups to turn the methods of the oppressor on each other or themselves. For example, female case managers may internalize social messages that women should be compliant, cooperative, and grateful. So, while men who contact human service agencies with an assertive sense of entitlement to effective services may be met with deference, women who present with the same tone may be dismissed as undeserving, combative, litigious, or “borderline”—especially in fields predominantly staffed by female workers.

A particularly powerful component of internalized oppression arises when its victims come to believe in a notion of scarcity. The oppressor creates a climate in which people fear there is not enough room for everyone, and so they begin a desperate attempt to conform to the oppressor’s ideals in order to survive. This can happen on an individual, group, community, or even societal level. People accept the negative stereotypes that say they are not good enough, and they begin to strive, largely unconsciously, toward a rigid idea of what may be acceptable. They may also attempt to impose their externally derived standards of right and wrong on other members of their communities, often quite harshly. Within targeted communities, this dynamic can contribute to pervasive and brutal strife. On an individual level, it creates people who are never able to feel that who

they are is enough. These people may seek protection by striving for the trappings of an idealized life in which they might someday measure up as “enough.” This looks different for everyone throughout the world, and yet at the risk of overgeneralizing, we can see some persistent themes.



*“Just remember, son, it doesn’t matter whether you win or lose—unless you want Daddy’s love.”*

I know from my membership and experience in Black communities that there is a widely held belief that if we work hard enough, if we labor long enough, if we produce enough, then we’ll be safe. In Jewish communities, I’ve experienced this as an emphasis on learning: If we’re learned enough, if we are intellectual enough, if we are in our heads enough, then we’ll avoid suffering. Being born and raised female, I internalized messages that taught me that if I nurture others enough, if I care enough, if I anticipate others’ needs enough, then everything will be okay. We can look at the groups we belong to and remember the messages we received from those who raised us, and from our society, and assess what we’ve come to believe about ourselves. Will we ever be “Black enough” or “man enough” or “gay enough”? The larger oppression model argues that this line of socialization leads to further oppression within and between groups, and leaves individuals with a deep, lingering sense of not being enough . . . ever.



New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has actually used a challenge to be "enough" as a recruiting tool for child protective specialists. The agency created a series of subway ads posing questions that were intended to recruit potential hires. One by one, the ads asked, "Are you clear enough?" "Are you brave enough?" "Are you cool enough?" "Are you wise enough?" "Are you smart enough?" "Are you strong enough?" "Are you good enough?" "Are you bold enough?" "Are you tough enough?" "Are you calm enough?" "Are you kind enough?" "Are you real enough?"

While ACS's reasons for designing this campaign were based in a desire to deliver the best possible services to the families they serve, it is worth exploring the impact of such messages. We can consider how this ethos manifests in our fields of work. When I facilitate workshops on trauma stewardship, I rarely hear from participants that they work or volunteer in places that encourage them to take care of themselves, to pace themselves at a sustainable rate, or to maintain balance in their lives. Many of our fields and places of work seem to function, instead, from a place of tremendous urgency. This sense of urgency distracts many organizations from addressing how to best retain healthy, happy people who will continue to contribute to the betterment of the world. It's very common to see an internalization of not doing enough pervading our workplaces. When our personal belief that we are not enough collides with our professional belief that we're not doing enough, we can feel like we're coming apart at the seams. And the haunting questions—Am I good enough? Am I tough enough? Am I smart enough?—can confuse our ability to be honest about how we're actually doing, day to day. Every day that passes, we think to ourselves that we haven't done enough because we're not being enough. We're often left with limitless dissatisfaction in our work and lives.

As vice curator of the education department, part of my work was to attract more youngsters into the field of conservation. The more I worked, the more facts about conservation and animal welfare I had to know. This information made me feel sad and despairing, and I would get angry easier. Eventually, I left the job.

Now I still do my best to help animals, but I do not want to know

more about the details of the animals' plight. Sometimes I feel guilty for bringing young people into this field, because I know this job is hard for their feelings and emotions. They probably will not be as happy as they used to be. Sorry, I know I am not a strong woman.

Luo Lan, conservation educator, People's Republic of China

## *Hypervigilance*

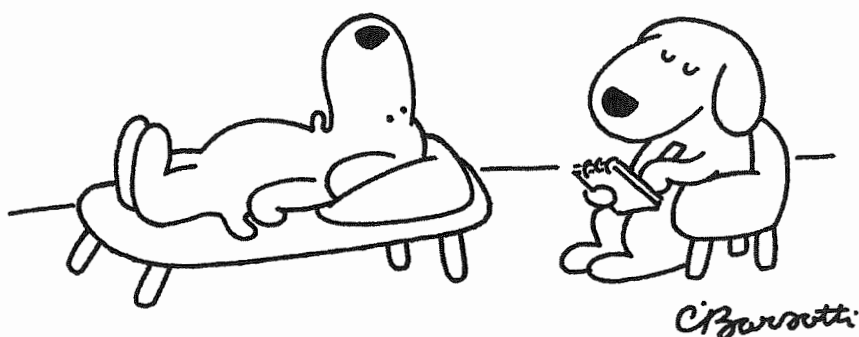
I eat in a hurry—I do everything in a hurry because I feel like there is a ticking time bomb waiting to go off.

Community activist

I remember being 18 years old, working in a domestic violence shelter. I watched the child residents and was awed by their awareness of everything that was going on around them—24 hours a day, seven days a week, 360 degrees. They knew the welfare system, the immigration system, the legal system. And they were seven years old. Recently I was working with a group of outreach workers for homeless youth and women in the sex trade, and one of them shared that she had a very hard time staying emotionally present in her relationships. “My husband often asks me where I am,” she said. “Even when you’re with him?” I asked. “Especially when I’m with him,” she answered. “Even on our honeymoon.”

Hypervigilance in our work creates a dynamic of being wholly focused on our job, to the extent that being present for anything else in our life can seem impossible. It is often an attempt to restore safety and prevent any further victimization by anticipating and recognizing everything as a potential threat and acting accordingly.

This experience is common for many people who have survived trauma. In 2006, Seattle’s Jewish Federation experienced a hate crime when a man entered the building and shot several people. A survivor’s husband described how after the shooting, the level of his alertness to his surroundings went through the roof. He couldn’t see his environment in any sort of measured context. Everything felt exaggerated, significant, and dangerous to him.



*"I bark at everything. Can't go wrong that way."*

I recently received photos from a friend's wedding, and as I sat there looking through them, I thought to myself, "I wonder when the domestic violence is going to start."

Domestic Violence Protection Order advocate

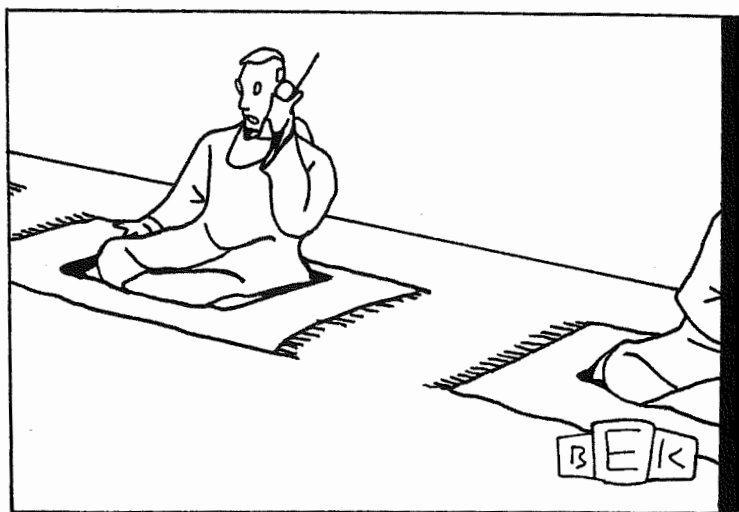
The same effect can happen over time with people who regularly bear witness to others' trauma. Having a trauma exposure response can make us feel like we're always "on," even during times when there is absolutely nothing that can or should be done. There is no rest for the weary. As one AmeriCorps worker who is based in a police department said, "I assess everything from a crime risk perspective—every building, every open place, every location."

Elaine Miller-Karas, educator, psychotherapist, and cofounder of the Trauma Resource Institute, has helped develop a model called Trauma First Aide. Trauma First Aide can be used in time-limited situations to stabilize the nervous systems of people who have had traumatic experiences. According to this model, the nervous system's natural swings between internal sensations of well-being (or comfort) and tension (or discomfort) get interrupted during overwhelming events. Some people get stuck in a state of hyperarousal, which can include hypervigilance and heightened states of anxiety; others may sink into states of numbness or depression. People may spend

extended periods at either extreme, rather than returning to an ideal state of homeostasis or balance. Miller-Karas worked with first responders and survivors both in Thailand and on the Gulf Coast, and she recounts that many of them came to “live in states of dysregulation fluctuating between being stuck on ‘high’ or ‘low.’ If we can help them regulate their nervous systems in the aftermath of what they have been through, then they can get back in their body and walk through their life. If you’re frozen or in a state of hyperarousal all the time, you don’t have the attention you need to do the work of healing. When you are able to attend to and stabilize your body, then you can be more present in mind, body, and spirit.”

This can get complicated. Reasonable people may begin to feel that they are constantly surrounded by potential dangers. If you work in violence prevention and you listen to pop music, you may recognize that the majority of “love” songs are about stalking, that most “horror” films have a domestic violence theme, and so on. I remember the first time I shopped for my daughter in the Gap’s “girls” section instead of its “toddlers” section. The provocative nature of the clothing for four- and five-year-olds was enough to put me over the edge, but then I realized there was more to pay attention to: The loud music playing throughout the department was entirely about a boy trying to track down and find a girl and why wasn’t she taking his calls and what would he do without her? When it became unbearable after a mere two minutes, I went to the cashier and asked if it’d be possible to change the track, to which she replied that the music came out of Gap headquarters in San Francisco, and I’d need to contact them.

Our tendencies toward hypervigilance may be further reinforced by modern technology. By being connected and constantly informed, they say, we can increase our safety and keep our families safe. So the expectation increases that we be reachable and “on.” First came voice mail and pagers, then cell phones and e-mail, and now BlackBerrys, Treos, iPhones, and other on-demand devices. Hypervigilance makes it difficult to ever turn off the information, get away from work, and relax and be present in our lives. This is a trend that has far-reaching implications, even miles away from our jobs. Stephanie Levine, a massage therapist and public school volunteer in Seattle, described the start of a vacation: “Once I arrived, I felt like I had to do everything



*"I'm crazed with this noble path—let me get back to you."*

immediately. Go for a walk, read a book, take a nap . . . I had to hurry up and relax." This phenomenon transports us out of the present moment and keeps us anticipating what's next. We have the option to turn the devices off, but our own behavior is harder to shift.

### ***Diminished Creativity***

All my energy goes into just getting through my days. I don't meditate anymore or write; that's what I used to do at night. I don't do anything anymore but work and go home and watch TV.

Community organizer

Diminished creativity is when you think to yourself, "When was the last time I had an original thought?" You may find that you're bored with what you're doing and you can't remember a time when you felt creative. This is a damaging state of mind, not only because our joy decreases, but also because we may be less innovative at work. Diminished creativity as a trauma exposure response may help explain the stagnant conditions in many of our fields of practice.

I often look around and think: Given all the brilliant, competent, tremendous people in so many fields, how is it that this is where we

are in the 21st century? The goal of the founders of the domestic violence movement was not that, decades later, women and children would still be in shelters. The early leaders of the U.S. public school system could never have imagined the depth of the problems in our schools today. And how is it possible that in the midst of a global climate crisis, there has been such a dearth of creative solutions? One answer is this: The deeper we sink into a culture of trauma, the less flexible and original our thinking becomes.

Alice laughed. "There is no use trying," she said: "one *can't* believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and  
Through the Looking Glass*

Lewis Carroll, English author, logician, clergyman,  
and photographer

Creativity requires embracing a certain amount of chaos, and it demands some leaps of faith. The ancient Roman philosopher Cicero said, "Only the person who is relaxed can create, and to that mind, ideas flow like lightning." When we contend with trauma exposure, however, we often find ourselves craving more structure and less creativity. We may resist change even when existing structures are out of date and detrimental to us personally and professionally.

I had the privilege of working as an advocate with the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse. One thing we did to maintain some level of creativity was to substitute one staff meeting per month with a writing group that we had collectively formed. The staff size was small, and yet it was always hard to maintain the group; our built-in resistances kept us thinking that we should be doing more important things than writing down the latest theories and approaches to our work. Nevertheless, we remained committed. We knew that if we let day-to-day busywork consume all our time, we would not grow. And if we did not progress, the movement we were a part of would not move forward.

The practice of creativity among the Northwest Network staff

continued to evolve over the years. From writing came new projects and community connections, and from those connections came new ways to frame and understand the work. The messiness of creativity and engagement made fertile ground for growth, change, and innovation.



*"Really, I'm fine. It was just a fleeting sense of purpose—I'm sure it will pass."*

Over time, the Northwest Network's approach to its core work was transformed. Staff members challenged themselves to envision what they wanted to create in the world as clearly as they had previously defined what they wanted to end. While the organization originally understood its mission as "ending domestic violence," it came to understand that the greater work was to create the conditions necessary to support loving and equitable relationships.

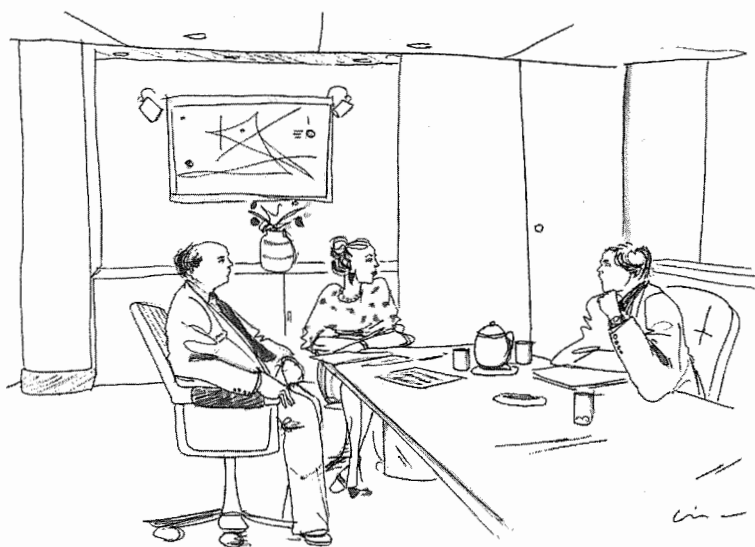
The Northwest Network has grown from an agency offering first-rate traditional antiviolence services into a thriving and engaged community organization that is developing new and exciting strategies to end violence and create strong, loving communities.

## *Inability to Embrace Complexity*

There are more worlds than the one you can hold in your hand.

Albert Hosteen, in *The X-Files*, "The Sixth Extinction II: Amor Fati," American science-fiction television series

There are strong indicators for the inability to embrace complexity: You crave clear signs of good and bad and right and wrong, and you feel an urgent need to choose sides. The answer "no" comes out of your mouth constantly, and you feel like your shoulders are up by your ears. Your explanations sound like bumper-sticker slogans and your thinking is fractured; there's no cohesive whole. You may be dogmatic and opinionated, and you may look to take a side in a debate no matter what the debate is about: All that concerns you is taking a stand.



*"What I'm proposing is this. No."*

Taking sides can surface in workplace dynamics. We may see it in the form of gossip, cliques, divisions among staff, and rigid expectations of workers. As Billie Lawson, trauma social worker and foremother of the trauma exposure field, has said, "You cannot afford to negotiate roles when you're in the fray." You may feel like you're in

high school, or worse yet, junior high. You don't hear positive statements like, "Wow, that program in south county seems to be having a hard time; I wonder how we can help them." Instead, it's much more negative and catty. You don't take a minute to check in with a colleague who seems to be struggling; it's more like, "I always knew she was going to be a train wreck." Taking sides can also show up in our clinical work, when we are unable to hold the entirety of a situation in our hands. Pay attention if you hear yourself making comments like "I love the mom I'm working with, but I really hate the dad."

This kind of behavior can have the same kinds of consequences as pouring fuel on a fire. No one steps in and says, "Let's slow down and think about this: What could be going on here? How else can we look at this? What have we forgotten to consider? What would be most helpful?" Instead, workers may escalate a volatile situation by making assumptions, passing judgment, talking about things they are not sure of, or engaging in any number of shortsighted behaviors.

Inability to manage complexity can show up in larger societal movements. This was true of the domestic violence movement as it sought criminal penalties for people who batter, for instance. For what seemed like very good reasons at the time, its leaders limited the complexity of their response to domestic violence. Connie Burk explores this issue further in her account of the domestic violence movement's reliance on the criminal legal system, "A Question of Complexity," which begins on page 74.

I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.

Maxine Hong Kingston, Chinese-American writer, author of *The Woman Warrior*, and National Humanities Medal honoree

The inability to embrace complexity may be familiar to you if you have ever experienced primary trauma. Your individual need for the concrete elements of reality becomes paramount. Making room within yourself for all the complexities and gray areas is too painful and seems cognitively impossible. When we're rested, in a good space emotionally, and on our "A" game, we know that the world is a

complex place; we know that seeing things through a flattened and reductionist lens does not serve us. And yet we live in a polarized civic universe: Our legal system is adversarial, as is our two-party-based political structure. We have zero-sum power systems embedded throughout our public institutions. You can only vote for or against. You can only be found guilty or not guilty. You can work for an initiative, work against an initiative, or be completely apathetic. And in the recent era of American politics, you're "either with me or you're with the terrorists."

What we see happening, then, is an internalization of binary structures that may at times work for large-scale governance but are almost never effective in the causes, predicaments, and relationships of everyday life. Most situations cry out for people to honor and understand the complexities of the situation.

This is challenging to put into practice. Embracing complexity doesn't mean that we should abandon the critique of cultural and social institutions that is so essential to social and environmental change work, nor does it mean that we should become complete moral relativists. We have an obligation to call out environmental racism, date rape, abuse within the prison industrial complex, and so on. And yet we misuse this responsibility to prophetic critique if we objectify and simplify what is happening.

I received a copy of a letter written by the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh to George Bush, then the president of the United States. In 1967, Thich Nhat Hanh was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr. for his efforts to end the Vietnam War. His life and work have provided a shining example of how we can continue to seek common ground, even with those who have ravaged our lives with violence. This letter is a powerful example of an attempt to change a situation while understanding its complex nature.

Dear Mr. President,

Last night i saw my brother (who died two weeks ago in the U.S.A.) coming back to me in a dream. He was with all his children. He told me, "Let's go home together." After a millisecond of hesitation, i told him joyfully, "OK, let's go."

Waking up from that dream at 5 am this morning, i thought of the situation in the Middle East; and for the first time, i was able to cry. I cried for a long time, and i felt much better after about one hour. Then i went in the kitchen and made some tea. While making tea, i realized that what my brother had said is true: our home is large enough for all of us. Let us go home as brothers and sisters.

Mr President, i think that if you could allow yourself to cry like i did this morning, you will also feel much better. It is our brothers that we kill over there. They are our brothers, God tells us so, and we also know it. They may not see us as brothers because of their anger, their misunderstanding, their discrimination. But with some awakening, we can see things in a different way, and this will allow us to respond differently to the situation. I trust God in you, i trust the Buddha nature in you. Thank you for reading.

In gratitude and with brotherhood

Thich Nhat Hanh

Plum Village

Fax 601a per : 37556616151	PLUM VILLAGE	AT-344 17/09/95 02:12	Pgt 1
Honorable George W. Bush The White House Washington D.C., U.S.A.		Plum Village 66 Pag 2426a France 8.8.06	
Dear Mr. President, Last night, i saw my brother (who died two weeks ago in the U.S.A.) coming back to me in a dream. He was with all his children. He told me, "Let's go home together." After a millisecond of hesitation, i told him joyfully, "OK, let's go." Waking up from that dream at 5am this morning, i thought of the situation in the Middle East; and for the first time, i was able to cry. I cried for a long time, and i felt much better after about one hour. Then i went to the kitchen and made some tea. While making tea, i realized that what my brother had said is true: our home is large enough for all of us. Let us go home as brothers and sisters. Mr. President, i think that if you could allow yourself to cry like i did this morning, you will also feel much better. It is our brothers that we kill over there. They are our brothers, God tells us so, and we also know it. They may not see us as brothers because of their anger, their misunderstanding, their discrimination. But with some awakening, we can see things in a different way, and this will allow us to respond differently to the situation. I trust God in you, i trust the Buddha nature in you. Thank you for reading. In gratitude and with brotherhood Thich Nhat Hanh Plum Village.			

## A QUESTION OF COMPLEXITY

### *Criminalization and the Movement to End Domestic Violence*

When U.S. second-wave feminists began organizing against domestic violence in the late 1960s and 1970s, it was still legal in most states for a man to rape his wife, and only a handful of states had serious criminal consequences for wife battering. Husbands and lovers beat their partners with impunity—secure in the knowledge that the consequences, when there were any, would be manageable. The pain and suffering experienced by women beaten by their partners was minimized and denied. Women were told to be better wives. Men were told to take a walk around the block and cool off.

Advocates dedicated themselves to ending violence, and they knew that women's experiences of abuse would have to be taken seriously in order to make change. In U.S. courts, criminal offenses are viewed as harms not only to the victim but also to the entire society—that's why criminal cases are filed as *The State v. John Doe*, not *Jane Doe v. John Doe*. Women in the antiviolence movement believed that domestic violence and sexual assault would have to be acknowledged by the state as harms against society that should carry severe criminal consequences before any real change could happen.

Despite vocal misgivings from many in the field, the domestic violence movement oriented itself toward a criminal legal response. The urgency of the approach was repeatedly reinforced as women fleeing to domestic violence shelters shared horrific stories of violence at the hands of their husbands and partners, and conveyed devastating experiences of being dismissed or ignored by law enforcement and the courts when they tried to reach out for help. Some of the initial community-based responses to battering were abandoned as the apparent need for a criminal response began to eclipse other perspectives. In the years that followed, the movement brought the full force of its political and organizational will to bear on creating and sustaining a criminal legal response to domestic violence as the primary antiviolence strategy.

Thirty years later, in an enduring testament to the courage and dedication of its organizers, the movement had made great strides

## **A QUESTION OF COMPLEXITY**

toward achieving its goals: Public awareness of the issue had skyrocketed, replacing a lethal history of silence about family violence with one of growing openness. Spousal rape is illegal in all 50 states, every state has felony domestic battery crimes, and most states have criminal courts dedicated to family violence. Issues of policing in response to domestic violence have been on the national agenda for over a decade. Meanwhile, even as the apparent victories mounted, another story was playing out across the nation. The United States increased its prison population from 300,000 in 1977 to over 2 million in 2005 (U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], Bureau of Statistics). The number of people under correctional supervision (parole, probation, jail, prison) was over 7 million in 2005—up from fewer than 2 million in 1980. According to the U.S. DOJ, at year-end 2005, there were 3,145 Black male prison inmates per 100,000 Black males in the United States, compared with 1,244 Hispanic male inmates per 100,000 Hispanic males, and 471 white male inmates per 100,000 white males. Prison rape, HIV infection among incarcerated people, and other prison violence have escalated to a national crisis.

As the prison boom continued, efforts originally intended to protect people from violence and oppression became increasingly enmeshed with the criminal justice system. Shelter programs began to cooperate more and more with law enforcement and prosecutors. Some survivors who were reluctant to participate in prosecution came under greater scrutiny and pressure. In the past 10 years, domestic violence survivors have increasingly faced arrest and prosecution as a result of policing practices and battery laws that inadequately understand the experience of domestic violence. People of color, immigrants, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans people have expressed their fears about the danger of overreliance on the criminal legal system. People in these communities have long been the targets of biased policing and harsh criminal prosecution or deportation.

For many in the domestic violence field, the concerns of survivors and marginalized communities came as a surprise. “How could criminalizing domestic violence possibly have negative consequences?” they asked. The majority of advocates were still fighting tirelessly for

## A QUESTION OF COMPLEXITY

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the vicious assaults against women to be taken seriously as a crime. To most of them, the virtues of the strategy were self-evident. Criminal penalties were clearly “right.” It felt easy to dismiss the cautions and concerns of people inside and outside of the work.

Still, there were chinks in the armor. The negative consequences of an exclusive emphasis on criminalization had been meticulously documented and compellingly argued for years. Beth E. Richie laid out the intersections of racism, prosecution of poor Black women, and domestic violence in her groundbreaking book, *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women* (Routledge, 1995). Tillie Black Bear, director of the White Buffalo Calf Woman’s Society in South Dakota, and the women of Mending the Sacred Hoop in Minnesota demonstrated the connections between the forced removal of Native American children and the rise of family violence on reservations. For decades they argued for the restorative-justice tactics of health care, economic development, alcohol and drug treatment, and reparations instead of longer prison terms. Advocates working in lesbian and bisexual women’s communities in Seattle collected evidence to demonstrate that, in one year, over half of the lesbian survivors who had come into contact with the police had been arrested. These advocates argued for more community-based solutions that did not rely on prosecution and incarceration. South Asian, Eastern European, and Pacific Islander immigrants articulated the connections among harsh and confusing immigration policies, the increase in the trafficking of women and children into the United States, and their experiences of abuse.

Attorneys called for greater assistance in civil legal issues, since domestic violence survivors are far more often caught up in civil matters like custody battles than they are in criminal cases. Still other activists showed how the movement’s immersion in an adversarial legal system was dehumanizing people who batter and costing us opportunities for grassroots community involvement. As advocates spread the message that people who batter are fundamentally criminals, friends and families become increasingly hesitant about getting involved. As a result, it grew harder to undermine the isolation of abuse.

## A QUESTION OF COMPLEXITY

In these critiques, people were calling for greater complexity in our thinking and our work. In the domestic violence field, as in almost every movement to make justice and stop human suffering, the urgency of the need can narrow our view and disorder our priorities. We can convince ourselves that the harm we are trying to end is so bad that the details of how we stop it don't matter.

The movement to support women's self-determination and end family violence started down the path to criminalization with the intention of seeking justice and creating a societal stake in women's safety. By paying too little attention to the complexities of the issue, it found itself floundering in an ever-urgent, perpetual-crisis maelstrom of criminal legal response. The work required to build and sustain this response consumed most of the movement's resources, diverting energy away from community-based strategies that took into account the limits of a criminalized response. As a result, the movement inadequately addressed the concerns most expressed by survivors—breaking isolation, building community support, meeting children's needs, and fostering economic stability. ☀

## Minimizing

I minimize with myself. If anything happens, I'm like, "Well, I didn't get shot, so what do I have to complain about?"

Community organizer

I was working with the Audubon Nature Institute in New Orleans 10 months after Hurricane Katrina. Its programs include the zoo, the aquarium, and multiple learning centers and parks throughout New Orleans. A gentleman who had been dedicated to caring for the animals during and after the storm had eventually gone to visit his sister on the East Coast. He was walking with her on a city street when they encountered the body of a man who had fallen from high scaffolding and died just as the medics arrived. As they continued on, his sister admitted that she was extremely unnerved at his lack of reaction to what they'd just seen. "How could you not be shaken up or show any emotions?" she asked.

He told me, "On the one hand, I felt like I should explain to her, and on the other hand, I felt kind of defeated. I thought to myself, 'She can't understand, she won't get it.' I've seen so much in these past 10 months that I just don't feel much deeply anymore. I didn't know how to communicate that to her so she'd understand." He said he could not imagine what would have to happen for him to experience strong feelings again.

People who bear witness to a range of human experience may become increasingly inoculated to others' pain. We may start out being moved by each person's story, but over time it may take more and more intense or horrific expressions of suffering to deeply move us. We may consider less extreme experiences of trauma as less "real" and therefore less deserving of our time and support. "Minimizing" occurs when we trivialize a current situation by comparing it with another situation that we regard as more dire.

Minimizing is not triaging and it is not prioritizing. This coping strategy is at its worst when you've witnessed so much that you begin to downplay anything that doesn't fall into the most extreme category of hardship. While you may still be able to nod and do active

listening and feign true empathy, internally you are thinking something like, “I cannot believe this conversation is taking 20 minutes of my time. There wasn’t even a weapon involved.”



*“Listen, pal, they’re all emergencies.”*

It takes only one extreme situation to get us started on minimizing everything else. Again, minimizing is not setting priorities in our work, it is the experience of losing our compassion and ability to empathize because we are comparing others’ suffering or putting it into a hierarchy. We may also begin to minimize when we feel saturated to the point that we can’t possibly let any more information in. Instead of being able to experience the given situation for what it is, we minimize what we are hearing or seeing. We do so in a desperate attempt to avoid hitting our breaking point. We are literally at capacity.

This phenomenon is frequently a factor in creating a negative organizational culture. If only the most extreme cases deserve attention or get respect, then it behooves us to experience and express things in the most extreme way, right? Related to this, if we are voicing our irritations, concerns, and even legitimate critiques in very escalated ways, it is difficult for people to come to us with a complex

response, and soon everyone may wind up taking sides. For example, if a worker says, “I feel like my boss just beat me up,” it’s much harder for anyone to talk through the specifics of the conflict than if the worker had said, “I do not feel that my objections were taken seriously, and I felt like I was being railroaded into agreeing to this task.”

Finally, comparing leads to competition. If it takes something extreme to catch everyone’s attention, well, we can meet that challenge! We may pump up the drama, or we may want to mine for the extreme in a situation so that our caseloads or issues seem more legitimate. Then we can have the prestige of being a person who handles the “real” stuff and who works for an agency that really “gets it.”

Many people report that minimizing causes great distress in their personal lives. For example, your partner comes home from work and starts to describe his hard day, and you respond, with teeth clenched, “Really, honey? A hard day at your dot-com job? Sit down, and let me tell you about people who have hard days.” Or your children pour out a story about something that upset them on the school playground, and you reply, “You should be grateful you get to go to school and have a playground at all. Do you know how few children around the world have playgrounds to play on?”

One family caseworker told me this story involving her five-year-old daughter. The child approached her mother for help with a mild, yet sincere, grievance about her father, only to be met with this explosive response: “You’re lucky you even have a father. Every day I work with kids who don’t have a father. Have never met their father. Don’t even know what a father is!!!” Mortified at her sudden and impassioned outburst, the caseworker tried to undo the damage with her daughter but found in subsequent weeks that it had made an impression. Her daughter would repeatedly ask her, “Mommy, do you think that little boy has a daddy? What about that little girl?”

There may come a point when you feel as if nothing, ever again, will engage your empathy. A teacher once told me that she’d had days when her children would begin to complain about something and she’d retort, “It’s not Auschwitz.” That would be the end of the conversation.

## Chronic Exhaustion/Physical Ailments

I feel like I need a wheelbarrow for the bags underneath my eyes.

AmeriCorps worker

There is a difference between feeling tired because you put in a hard day's work and feeling fatigued in every cell of your being. Most of us have experienced a long day's work and the reward of hard-earned exhaustion. We sink into bed grateful for our soft pillows and the promise of a sweet night's sleep. That is one kind of tired. The kind of tired that results from having a trauma exposure response is a bone-tired, soul-tired, heart-tired kind of exhaustion—your body is tired, your mind is tired, your spirit is tired, your people are tired. You can't remember a time when you weren't tired.



*"No, not there, please. That's where I'm going to put my head."*

This kind of exhaustion is most likely to emerge among people who feel completely overwhelmed by the urgency of the tasks at hand, but it also affects workers who have a balanced sense of what they can and cannot accomplish. Kati Loeffler is a veterinarian and scientist based in China. Her work includes improving the quality of

care of domestic animals, working in wildlife conservation, doing veterinary and husbandry training in a giant panda breeding center, providing veterinary care for a black bear rescue center, and working to improve animal welfare and protect natural habitats internationally. “It is difficult to say how much of one’s weariness and compromised energy and the struggle against despair are due to one’s personality and aging body and how much to the toll of one’s work,” says Loeffler. “The extent to which animals suffer, as individuals and as species, due to human activity is overwhelming, and what little the handful of us who are trying to protect them from our own species are able to achieve is so very little and so very slow. Realization of the overwhelming need and pain in the world and our relative ineffectiveness to mitigate it is difficult to cope with.”

Trauma exposure itself is tiring. As exposure accrues, our bodies and minds will require extra attention in order to become fully rested and refreshed. The situation becomes even more difficult if we get stuck in a trauma exposure response. Our symptoms, like feeling helpless and hopeless or being hypervigilant, are exhausting in their own right.

One underrecognized factor that may contribute to our level of fatigue is the belief that we have no choice about the work we do. This understanding may be conscious or unconscious. We may tell ourselves that we have no choice because our task is too important—the fate of the planet rests in our hands. Alternatively, we may feel bound to our work without knowing why. For example, it may never have occurred to us that our lives have been shaped by a deep-seated conviction that given our family, our ancestors, our destiny, there is no other work we can do. Even if we think we could change jobs, we may believe that we’re meant to remain in a helping profession. When humans feel obligated, they very often feel tired.

Additionally, I know that in many fields, a sense of fatigue can become an accepted aspect of a seasoned worker’s demeanor. Many of us are familiar with the “been there, done that” ethos that takes root in workers when they’ve been on the job or in a particular movement for a while. Compared to the cynical, world-weary old-timers, people who are excited and energetic are often seen as young and naïve.

The fresh-scrubbed and hopeful idealism of the new worker

starting out may gradually give way to a thrashed, haggard, martyred persona. This persona conveys that you are too cool for immature optimism, that you have been around the block and have seen a few things, and that you are important—and this persona can actually be contagious. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, it's often gray out, there's coffee all around, and when everyone says "I'm tired" during the check-in at the beginning of staff meetings, it can be easy to just go along, knowing that if you express any high level of energy at all, you may be accused of being manic.

I don't have energy for anything anymore. It literally takes all my energy to get up and try to just walk the dog, let alone do anything else. You don't even have energy anymore for the things you enjoy doing. Doing anything at all just feels like too much.

Domestic violence worker

Finally, we can try so hard to keep from hitting rock bottom that we feel exhausted from the effort. We may be so invested in minimizing and ignoring the many consequences of trauma exposure and proving that we are still up for any challenge that we push ourselves harder and harder. Instead of taking the break we need, we may take on another project or commit to another campaign—hoping that it will give us a boost to overcome our sense of fatigue. It's helpful to be able to discern if we're tired because of the accrued toll of many earnest days (or weeks or months) of work or if we are tired because we feel obligated, have internalized a persona of exhaustion, or are fending off that "rock bottom." Listening to our bodies is a direct way to gain insight.

As the Trauma Center in Boston, Massachusetts, writes in its literature for law enforcement officers: "Physical complaints are very common; the body keeps the score." Back pain, migraine headaches, body aches, clinical depression, high blood pressure, and other ailments may be symptoms not only of physical distress but also of the accrued consequences of trauma exposure. As I continue my work with trauma exposure, I increasingly hear stories of people for whom the physical impact has been severe. Dozens of workers have told

me about newly diagnosed health concerns, including stress-induced diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, and cancer. A common theme is that they are being urged to take a leave from work by their doctor and yet they're having a hard time doing it. Recently I worked with a chemical dependency counselor who had no history of heart disease in her family. She told this story: "I grew up in an alcoholic family where at age seven I was responsible for my younger siblings. So when I am asked to do something, I am committed to doing it. At my job, a colleague left, and I was assigned her workload—temporarily, they told me, but a new hire never came on. Several weeks into carrying two full-time caseloads, I had a heart attack at work. When I came back to work after recovering, my agency was restructuring. When they delegated our new caseloads, mine was the exact same number of cases as before. I went to my supervisors and said, 'I can't do this.' They apologized and took away half of it, leaving me with the caseload for a full-time plus a part-time position. I tried to do that. Six weeks later I had my second heart attack. And it was only then that I was able to be clear that I can only do my job, and my job alone. But it was really, really hard for me to admit that."



*"And the dim fluorescent lighting is meant to emphasize the general absence of hope."*

## **A DREAM REALIZED WARREN BROWN**

### **WASHINGTON, D.C.**

*After graduating from Brown University in 1993, Warren Brown worked as a reproductive health educator in Providence, Rhode Island, and in Los Angeles. However, he soon became frustrated with the required curriculum, which did not answer the questions his students asked. He decided he wanted to combine a law degree with advanced public health training, so he went back to school. After his graduation from George Washington University in 1998, Brown took a job litigating health care fraud on behalf of the federal government for the Department of Health and Human Services.*

*Meanwhile, he pursued his personal passion for creating cakes. On New Year's Eve, 1999, he resolved to start selling what he baked. He maxed out his credit card to buy an oven, a double-door refrigerator, and other basic equipment. For the next 10 months, he maintained an exhausting schedule of full-time legal work followed by three to five hours a night in the kitchen. He quit his HHS job for good in 2000. Two years later he founded CakeLove, which features all-natural confections made from scratch, and which has repeatedly topped readers' polls as the best bakery in Washington, D.C. Brown has attracted a wealth of media coverage, even appearing on The Oprah Winfrey Show, and in 2006 he was named the capital's Small Business Person of the Year. Brown continues to pursue his entrepreneurial spirit by opening additional stores, expanding the product line, and hosting Sugar Rush on the Food Network. He frequently speaks to young students and rising entrepreneurs about business development and finding one's passion. The following lessons for living were drawn from the testimonials he includes on his Web site, [www.cakelove.com](http://www.cakelove.com).*

**L**aw school was a grueling period of endless projects and paperwork. I felt like I was losing connection with myself. Early on in the program, I was compelled to ask, "What makes me happy?" Asking myself this was key. It helped me take control and salvage my graduate school experience by setting aside time to do good things for my soul. Looking back, school wasn't the enemy; it trained me to focus. And even though it felt like a creative straightjacket at the time, I funneled loads of extra energy into very satisfying creative moments. Together, they got me to my passion.

## **A DREAM REALIZED WARREN BROWN**

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Something forced me to face and examine the question, “If not now, then when will I make my move?” I felt like I was bobbing: not going under, but also not going anywhere. My mind and body wanted to express themselves, but, in adjusting to life in D.C., I just did not see a venue from which to perform. After a year of grad school, I realized I would have to create my own world of satisfaction.

In an effort to find satisfaction, I listened to myself. I asked myself questions and listened to my responses. At that time, my questions were all over the place, really scatterbrained. I tried to let everything that even hinted at being a response find its voice. Over time, this voice manifested itself in different ways: cooking, drawing/writing, gardening, yoga, etc. I tried as many new things as I could.

One of the most difficult hurdles I faced in understanding how to vent my soul came during a summer internship in law school. I abruptly left the internship after only four weeks of work. I’ve always had mixed feelings about leaving: I didn’t want to fail to complete a job, but I wasn’t happy and saw no hope. While figuring out whether to leave the position, I turned to drawing as therapy. One of my drawings was a self-portrait—a young man with an ashen gray face, blue lips, reddened eyes, and wilting hair. Bleak and miserable for sure. Drawing this image was clear and convincing evidence that something was terribly wrong. The next day, I left the internship.

Of course, friends and family were shocked that I quit, but many people congratulated me. How odd, I thought. I wasn’t so sure why I should be congratulated for leaving a position, abruptly at that, and moving on to nothing except soulful self-indulgence. They saw me taking a step towards something that would make me happy. But I wasn’t sure I could see what made me happy. I only saw what didn’t make me happy. It turns out, of course, that half of knowing what you want is knowing what you don’t want.

Perhaps part of that experience demonstrated to me that it is possible to leave something without an absolutely fixed idea of what the future will hold—as long as you are following a passion toward a productive end. It was a difficult lesson, but perhaps one of the best yet. I relied on this experience four years later, when I planned my

## A DREAM REALIZED WARREN BROWN

exit from practicing law to develop my cake business.

Confident that my world would not collapse if I took matters into my own hands, I made some resolutions. I believe in making resolutions—practical ones that have merit help me. I allow myself all the time that I need to identify and understand what a resolution should be. I work to maintain and revise former resolutions so that I'm consistent and not constantly reinventing myself.

In 1999, I was struck with tremendous clarity in developing a set of resolutions: direct yourself to greatness; answer your calls; answer to yourself. This became my mantra, a meditating chant, a testament to end each day with, or juice to push myself further. This was the same year that I resolved to start baking. I wanted to expand my knowledge and skills in the kitchen. Measuring my triumphs and tragedies in the kitchen was easy. Coming to grips with the "big three" was a bit more of a challenge.

**DIRECT YOURSELF TO GREATNESS.** Sounds a bit haughty, maybe? It's not meant to. It's about obeying priorities. I envision my idea of success, and just as if my body is a puppet, my mind is the puppeteer that commands my body to act and make the vision happen.

**ANSWER YOUR CALLS.** Literally taken from an effort to stop evading phone calls in a period of my life when I felt morose and antisocial, this precept is really a commitment to venting my soul. Lending an ear to my inner voice, my id, the kid in me, my instincts. It's a commitment to not abandoning the hope and expectation that I have value—and I'll see it when I direct myself to greatness.

**ANSWER TO YOURSELF.** To thy self be true. At some point during graduate school, I became passive. I began waiting for events to happen rather than making them happen. Eventually I realized that I could continue asking myself what I want out of life for the rest of my life but not experience the main event: feeling alive. Once I refused to ignore the fact that big chunks of my life would slip right by if I didn't seize control and move, I began to discover my passion. I took

## A DREAM REALIZED WARREN BROWN

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a leap and threw cake parties. This is how CakeLove started. I hosted cake open houses to launch and publicize my business in its very early days. I knew I had a knack for baking, I enjoyed hosting parties, and I wanted to survey a crowd for support of my venture. It was not easy to put myself out for review by the public, both for a critique of the quality of my baking and for an assessment of the viability of my plans. Many people told me I was crazy to leave law to bake cakes. And most did not understand what kind of cakes I planned to market. But my legal training helped me identify a ripe market niche as well as develop solid recipes. I felt like I was on a mission to bring together everything I had ever learned. It was very difficult, but I also loved it.

Plain and simple, passion is a commitment without condition. It requires intensity for caring about something without regard to difficulty. It's a lot like love. Passion has meant finding myself happy baking cakes at 1:30 a.m. at the end of an 18-hour day, or occasionally smiling while scrubbing cake pans because it means business is still growing. It is a choice to take a chance where the work is left to you. Everything about passion can be hard at times. But the benefits and rewards for indulging it simply cannot be measured. Both the good and the ugly experiences I've had have helped me grow, and for that I am thankful.

And that's what finding a passion is all about: you. Do you want to fast-forward to the answer? Try not to. The best parts of life are in the roads traveled to get to your destination. That's where you struggle and that's where you laugh. Be in the moment and enjoy it. Taste life. Taste what interests you. Listen to yourself and the world around you. It's a slow and tedious process where being patient helps a lot. Take your time to be sure of what you want. Then work like hell to get it.

Being passionate is about recognizing what makes you happy,

### **A DREAM REALIZED WARREN BROWN**

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focusing on and learning about it, and, ultimately, doing it in the name of your own satisfaction and pleasure. It's not self-centered to lead your life in a direction that satisfies you. It's necessary to feel at peace. Prioritizing your passion means that you carve out room in your life to explore and understand it. Once you understand yourself and what you care about, you'll be in closer touch with your life and the others around you. For a while others may see you as aloof, but once you arrive at being in touch with your heart and soul, others will find inspiration in you to do the same.

How did it work for me? I explored my interests, developed them, listened to feedback, and kept going. Now my career is my former side interest and I love my job. Once I gave priority to what makes me happy, my life very naturally evolved into CakeLove. In April of 2000, I pushed too hard in too short a time span. It was too much, and on a seemingly random Tuesday in the very early morning, I lost the energy to keep going. Alarmed, I called my parents and told them I couldn't move my limbs. They would work if I really concentrated, but I could hardly focus on breathing. Confused, tired, and desperate, I called my wonderful neighbor, Karen, and asked her to drive me to the emergency room. At discharge from the ER, the doctor said to me, "You're fine, but you're not 15 anymore. You're suffering from exhaustion. Slow down."

I didn't think exhaustion could happen to me. But it did, and I felt the effects of that episode for months. Fatigue would set in and tell me loud and clear to "stop, rest, and sleep." But don't worry, these days I'm much better about keeping a close eye on how I'm doing, and I have plenty of help at the shop! In living my passion, when I wake up, I'm all go. I'm spiritually amped—ready and willing to dive into the satisfaction I get every day from baking. ☀

## *Inability to Listen/Deliberate Avoidance*

I leave my voice mail box full.

Nurse

When avoidance is a regular habit in your life, the highlight of your workday is when you don't have to do your job. When you go on home visits, you knock softly, you fervently hope that the jeep won't be repaired so you can't visit the research station, and you pray for inclement weather so you can have that long-awaited snow day. While voice mail was a good tool for avoidance, text messaging and e-mail are even better, since they provide that much less human contact.



*"No, Thursday's out. How about never—is never good for you?"*

Now and then, when you get an unexpected break in your day, it makes sense to delight in the time and space that opened up—after all, perhaps you really are in one of those challenging positions where only if something cancels could you possibly get your stats done or your reports completed. And yet it is important to be aware of avoidance, because it can indicate that you are heading toward a much larger problem.

Avoidance often shows up in people's personal lives. You choose not to answer your phone. You go out with people less and less—and if you do, it's with a specific group of folks who “get it,” or else it's with people whom you're confident will engage with you only superficially. Many people start feeling overwhelmed by their personal lives and lose energy for those things that once brought them joy: friends, family, yoga, sports, dancing, art, going out in general. As one attorney who did low-cost family law work recounted, “I never answer my phone at home anymore. My son got upset with me and said, ‘Mom, what is your deal?’ I said, ‘No one I work with answers their phone at home.’ ‘That still makes you crazy,’ he told me.” This is one of the signs of avoidance: If we let others get close to us, it's often others who are avoidant at the same levels we are, so we feel justified in our behavior and don't see it as problematic in the least.

When I first started doing crisis intervention work, I used to be so excited to answer the crisis line when it would ring. Then it got to where I'd just watch the phone ring and I'd feel dread and I'd no longer pick it up on the first ring.

AmeriCorps program coordinator

## ***Dissociative Moments***

I can see the people trying to get across that bridge just like I can see you right in front of me. I close my eyes and I can see the people who died.

R. Omar Casimire, educator, artist, poet,  
and post-Katrina reconstruction volunteer

At Harborview Medical Center as an ER social worker, I worked with a family that had experienced such a tragedy that I could not speak about it at home for days. I could not get any distance from the story, the images, the smell, and the sounds. When I finally began talking about it with my partner, he listened attentively and took in the details. We had been driving and now we had stopped to go into a store. As I continued the terrible story, I slowly realized that for the past few minutes he had been backing into a parking spot and then

putting the car into first gear and moving forward. Backing in, putting the car in first, moving forward, again and again. I stopped my story and said, “Sweetie, what are you doing?” He looked at me, surprised. “Nothing, I’m just parking the car.” This is someone who has heard his share of trauma and is extremely skilled at debriefing, but for some reason, in that instance, he became dissociated and wasn’t even aware of parking and reparking the car.

A dissociative moment can happen when a person experiences intrusive or overwhelming feelings. It is the experience of being engaged in your work and, for whatever reason, having something suddenly unhinge within you. You realize that you have not heard the last five sentences of what someone just said, or maybe you failed to track the behavior in front of you; you’re not following the story at all. Instead you’re remembering the last injured animal you couldn’t save or the day your brother became incarcerated or the time when your child was very ill. These are common occurrences. They are problematic only when we try to be stoic and plow through by pretending our reactions aren’t happening.

We may externalize our feelings, imagining it’s the client’s fault that we feel so bad, or we may internalize a sense of worthlessness because we’re having them. If we’re so jacked up by what we’re hearing, how can we possibly help others?

It is important to remember that any organism exposed to trauma will try to protect itself as a matter of course. In dissociative moments, we cut ourselves off from our internal experience in order to guard against sensations and emotions that could be overwhelming to our system. The *Newsweek* article discussed in the introduction contains an example of this phenomenon: “Like many others who work with the VA system, Bob Schwegel is a veteran himself. He helps Iraq vets apply for benefits, but it’s tougher and tougher for him to continue as he listens to their stories. ‘I get flashbacks of Vietnam. Sometimes I have to just get up and walk away.’”

Anyone with a personal history at all related to the work they do is likely to have experienced such dissociative moments. Many workers without a personal connection also report having such experiences, often for reasons they cannot explain. No matter who you are, these moments can be expected when you are exposed to

others' suffering. It is important to notice them, avoid isolation, and seek out the support you need.

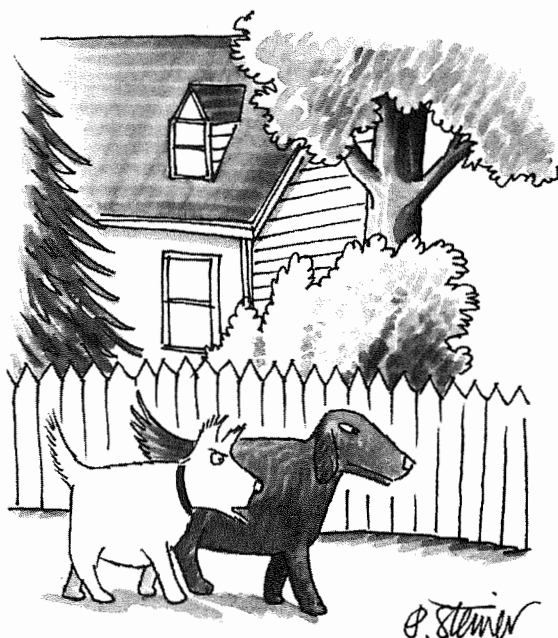
### ***Sense of Persecution***

What if you can't do anything different? I'm in my fourth year of residency. What if leaving isn't an option?

Family medicine resident

For our purposes, feeling persecuted speaks to feeling a profound lack of efficacy in one's life. We become convinced that others are responsible for our well-being and that we lack the personal agency to transform our circumstances. This notion has less to do with our physical surroundings than with our internal state. We may believe that we deserve better pay, safer work environments, more respect, adequate time away from work, and greater resources, and all this may be true. We can begin to seek change and reform in ways that are earnest, ethical, and fully committed. Alternatively, we can succumb to a belief that we have no capacity to influence any outcome. If so, we consent to suffer and relinquish power over our personal experience to outside forces. For many, this belief system may be inherited. As one social services director said, "Look, I come from a martyr heritage. Both my wife and I; I mean, martyrdom is what our families are all about."

Mistreatment can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We may seek it out, focus on it, and then chalk it up as further evidence of how wronged we are. It can get to a point where our sole motive in identifying persecution is to locate more proof that we are being exploited. And of course, we do live in a world that is rife with oppression and mistreatment of living beings and our planet. We never have to look far for examples. When we talk about a sense of persecution, we are talking about a state in which individuals, and eventually organizations, begin to thrive on choosing to remain powerless in the face of adversity. James Mooney, a medicine man of the Seminole Nation, is fond of the saying, "The person who wins the battle is the one who doesn't show up." He isn't advocating that you should not show up for your life, but rather that you should be present in a way that refuses to engage antagonistic, reactive energy.



*"It's always 'Sit,' 'Stay,' 'Heel'—never  
'Think,' 'Innovate,' 'Be yourself.'"*

There is often a clear path around our obstacles if we allow ourselves to back up, untangle ourselves from the brambles, and find another way.

This other way is illustrated by individuals and communities that have endured torment and brutality but remained in touch with their own inner strength. They have chosen to be powerful even in the face of persecution. A Holocaust survivor was asked to describe the horrors of being deprived of free will in the concentration camps. He said, "I had a great deal of freedom. I could decide if I looked up or down, if I looked to the right or to the left, if I put my right foot forward first or my left foot forward first."

It is not that having a sense of self-efficacy makes us immune to trauma exposure response, but it can give us many more options in terms of how we approach our life and make meaning of our experiences. Without a robust sense of being fundamentally in charge of oneself, a mindset of persecution can take root and we can lose faith in our own power to take the initiative. A community ecologist who worked in the Côte d'Ivoire after the civil war reflected, "The more common sequelae I see among my professional colleagues is an incredible inertia, something I would presume is akin to learned

helplessness. So many loved ones, so many years, so many opportunities have vanished (for schooling, business, hopes for their children). Even with friends, in ‘good times,’ with resources flowing again, salaries, and normalcy, they seem unable to cope, to be proactive, to look forward.”

I was struck by the discipline required to maintain a sense of personal agency during one of my graveyard shifts at Harborview Medical Center. It was three in the morning, and I was doing a psychiatric evaluation on someone who was in four-point restraints because he was having a psychotic break. He was calling me a bitch and trying to spit on me. The interview was taking longer than I felt it should. I wanted to get to my next patient, a sexual assault survivor. I began to feel persecuted and helpless, as if this man in restraints had all the control.

While I knew I had compelling reasons to feel overwhelmed, a disturbing feeling came over me: I was struck by how tenuous my sense of self-efficacy was. How quickly I could forget how deeply miserable anyone is who has to show up at the ER; how quickly I could lose sight of the fact that each person deserved my respect and empathy. It’s important to remember that no one specifically needs to be doing the persecuting for us to feel persecuted. Out of the blue, forces may come to bear on us in a way that makes us feel powerless and done wrong.

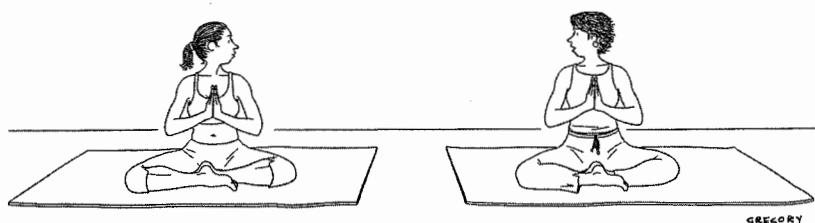
When I meet with organizations, this often surfaces in the language the employees adopt to describe their circumstances. They may be public health workers using graphic war analogies to describe their feelings about reorganizations of their agencies or domestic violence advocates using battering analogies to describe their feelings about the treatment they receive from the board of directors. If we listen to our own comments, we can gain excellent insight into our state of mind with regard to self-efficacy and persecution.

## ***Guilt***

I went shopping last week for a pair of shoes, and I thought to myself,  
 “What kind of person would go shopping for a pair of shoes right now?”

Community activist, New Orleans, nine months after  
 Hurricane Katrina

Personal feelings of guilt are impossible to separate from larger forces like sociopolitical context, life experiences, and philosophical/spiritual beliefs. When we try to get a handle on guilt, we have to grapple with questions like these: How do we live in a world where there is such a disparity of resources? What can we do to neutralize imbalances? How do we participate in our own privileges in a responsible manner? And finally, how can I cope with this, enjoy my life, and not be immobilized by guilt?



*"I just found an Eastern philosophy that's very accepting of S.U.V.s."*

There are a couple of things to note about guilt as it relates to trauma stewardship. One effect of guilt is that it can undermine the possibility for authentic connection between people. I was told by a chef who remained in New Orleans after the storm that every time residents encountered each other, they would ask, "How'd you do? How'd you make out?" This was painful for him, he said. If they made out okay, he felt sorry for his own misfortunes rather than happy for them, and then he felt guilty for thinking that way. If the other person had lost more than he had, he'd feel sick with guilt about his relative good fortune. This comparison of suffering is counter-productive, because while it's an effort to connect in a loving and kind way, it often leaves the participants overwhelmed with guilt.

We can see a parallel process with a trauma exposure response when workers get caught up in their discomfort about the disparity between their lives and the lives of those they serve. In a distorted attempt to shield people from our privilege, or to minimize our privilege, we can begin to purposefully diminish our radiance and wellness, hoping to equalize the situation in the short term.

Diane Tatum, a longtime advocate for survivors of domestic violence, described returning on a Monday to the domestic violence shelter where she worked and being asked by one of the residents, “How was your weekend?” “It was fine,” she answered, unenthusiastically. Which wasn’t exactly how she felt, because she usually had great weekends and she had a great life, which, of course, was in part what allowed her to do the work she did. But she downplayed her happiness because she felt guilty that her life was going well, and she didn’t want to flaunt it in front of people who were having a difficult time. Instead of giving an authentic answer, she hedged her bets and assuaged her guilt. In that moment, she distanced herself from the women at the shelter by not being genuine. Over time, we can internalize the flat “Fine” response and start to experience our life with less abundance and joy than we truly feel.

Back in the day in the domestic violence shelters where I worked, the survivors would remark that perhaps we, the advocates, should take time to do our nails or hair, as they did. It was a great statement that these women who had been through so much were still alive to the feelings of dignity and pleasure they could get from attending to themselves. Meanwhile, we as advocates were purposefully diminishing ourselves in an unsuccessful effort to connect with them more. Obviously we never want to flaunt the privilege in our lives: “Me and my husband who I’m legally married to and our big house? We had a great weekend!” It’s just about being honest, not pretentious, not patronizing. It’s about giving others the same honesty we’d expect if we were on the receiving end of services. It’s about being real.

I feel guilty because I can leave at the end of the day.

Housing rights advocate

Guilt also interrupts our ability to take in and be present for the life-sustaining energy in our lives. Thich Nhat Hanh gives a talk in which he asks if we should have to work to appreciate the beauty in life. He replies that no, we should not ever have to work to take in what is beautiful, what is precious, what is sacred; we should simply be open to absorbing life’s blessings as often as they present themselves. Because, as he says, “Suffering is not enough.” Thich Nhat Hanh joins

other masters who encourage us to be completely present for all things wonderful; if we are going to be present for life's suffering, we will need all the nourishment and rejuvenation that comes from life's beauty.

Guilt is one of the strongest signs of a trauma exposure response. It can block any experience of pleasure, peace, or happiness. Some workers find it difficult to enjoy a vacation (if they ever take one) because they feel guilty that they've left work behind while the habitats they're struggling to restore continue to be threatened. Others feel guilty about delighting in their children when they work with folks who, for whatever reason, aren't able to be with their children. Still others feel guilty living in a functioning community when they counsel clients who have lost their homelands to war. Workers have told me they won't explain that they're late to a meeting because their car broke down; they feel guilty for having a car. Others will take off their wedding bands out of guilt for being in a relationship. Guilt is effective, then, in interrupting both our ability to be in the present moment and our ability to absorb all that is well in our lives.

One housing rights activist and shelter worker described the joy that can come from overcoming guilt and being authentic with our clients. He explained, "I like to cook, and one night I'd brought in some food I'd cooked. I felt guilty, though, so I was off in the corner eating and really trying to hide it. One of the residents came up to me and said, 'What do you got there?' 'It's nothing,' I said. 'No, really, that smells good. Did you cook that?' 'Yes,' I finally said. 'You know, I cook, too. I love to cook!' the resident said. Well, what happened then was I set up a way for us to cook together, and now we do that all the time. Not only that, but other men have come together, and there are cooking groups in the shelter. And you know, that's been really cool. That was never happening before."

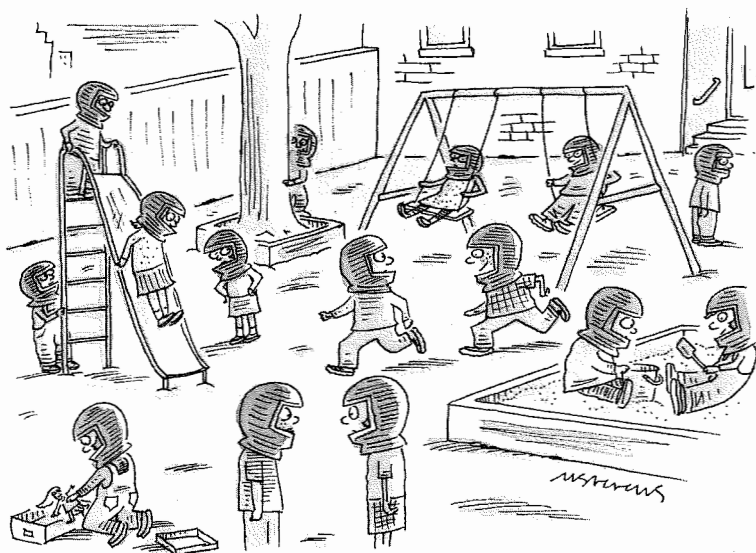
## Fear

Fear is the cheapest room in the house.

I'd like to see you in better living conditions.

Hafiz, Persian mystic and poet

Fear can manifest in a number of ways: fear of intense feelings, of personal vulnerability, or of potential victimization. Fear is a natural and healthy response to much of what we witness. If we lived in a society where all people were supported in the full spectrum of their feelings, if there were no right or wrong feelings for a given situation, and if, when one felt fearful, one could simply share that with others, receive support, and move through it, fear would have a different impact. Instead, what often happens is that we live with a great deal of fear as a result of our exposure or hardship, yet we may not know how to process it, and thus it occupies space inside us.



*"I liked recess a lot better before the safety helmets."*

Fear can squelch our ability to think creatively and well. As they said in the science-fiction film *Dune*, "Fear is the mind killer." Any number of damaging individual and societal trends have fear at their root. In the 1999 science-fantasy film *Star Wars: Episode I—The*

*Phantom Menace*, Yoda describes the evolution of fear. He explains, “Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”

Too many people want us to worry about too many things.

I have a limited capacity for panic. It is not to be wasted on the trivial.

John Petersen, Danish actor

Years ago, I was able to do some work with animal control workers, who were the most honest group I’ve heard from about this. With eloquence, they described how easily fear could harden into prejudices about certain breeds of animals, then morph into stereotypes about certain people, and finally leap into generalizations about races, socioeconomic groups, and neighborhoods. Whether the call involved neglected puppies or attacking dogs, they had to get on top of their fear. It is important to identify our fear and make the connections about what is fueling it.

One of the reasons it is hard for us to connect with our fear is that it makes us feel so vulnerable. It may make us uncomfortable to recognize that we have so much in common with our clients, who are also often fearful. If we are working to stop pandemics or racing against the clock to save the environment, we may worry that if we open the door to fear, it will completely overwhelm us, leaving us so swamped with terror that we can no longer act at all. In short, many of us opt to disconnect from our feelings of fear because it hits a nerve of our own fragility in life. Such denial may feel like the only viable path, but it is worth holding up to question. As we have noted, the physical price we pay for distancing ourselves from this natural response may be very costly.

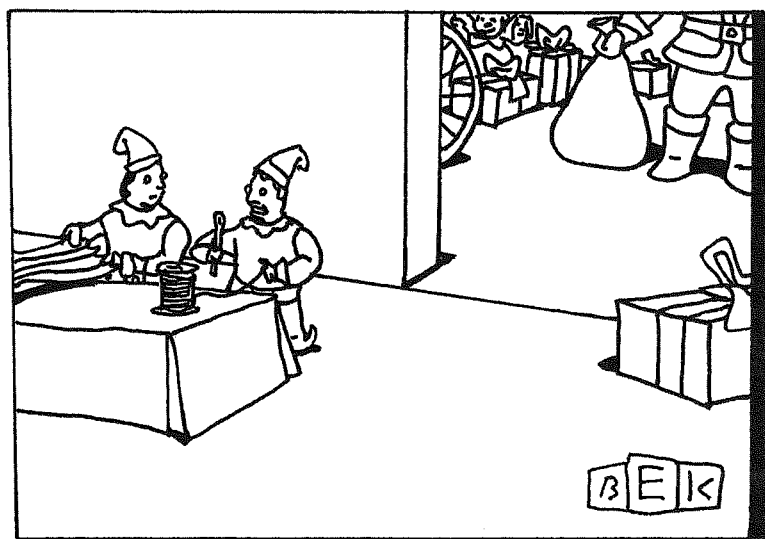
When we acknowledge our own fear, we have an opportunity to deepen our compassion, not only for ourselves but also for every being that has ever been afraid. If we look deeply, many of us will discover that the fear that underlies all other fears is the fear of our own death. It is worth asking how we want to live knowing that we will die. The answer is generally not that we would quit. Rather, it is that we would embrace the preciousness of life. We would choose to

be loving and compassionate, and to deepen our caring for others and the planet even in the face of our inevitable end.

## ***Anger and Cynicism***

When you see the suffering, when you experience it yourself, it's very hard to not want revenge.

Harn Yawngghwe, pro-democracy activist and director of the Euro-Burma Office, Burma



*"Obviously, behind all the jolliness there's a lot of rage."*

Anger is a common feeling among those trying to do right in the world. One may feel anger at the sources of injustice, at the treatment from one's organization, or at the clients themselves, to name a few. One may experience a hot, reactive anger or more of a cold, slow anger. Anger is complicated because the majority of people in our society have not been raised with good information or skills for managing it.

For most of us, anger is still primarily associated with times in childhood when bad things happened to us or when we had few concrete skills for channeling our feelings responsibly. How many of us feel like it's okay to feel angry? Do we know how our anger looks

and feels to others? Do we know what's actually at the root of our anger? Do we know how to work with our anger and resolve it in a productive way that does no harm and instead results in creativity and positive change?

We can also look at anger from a framework of systematic oppression. From childhood on, there is often rigid socialization around anger: who is allowed to feel angry, who is expected to be angry, which groups are seen as angry people. These social norms most often fall along the lines of gender, race, and socioeconomic upbringing. For example, boys may be socialized to believe that feelings such as sorrow or fear may be more safely expressed as anger, while girls are often taught that it is socially acceptable to express just about any feeling except anger. In time, both boys and girls may lose their capacity to recognize or even experience the full array of their emotions.

I have all this anger bottled up inside of me, and I feel like I can't let it out. I wouldn't know what to do with it, and I feel like it'd be too much. So it is just inside of me, and I can't hold it in anymore.

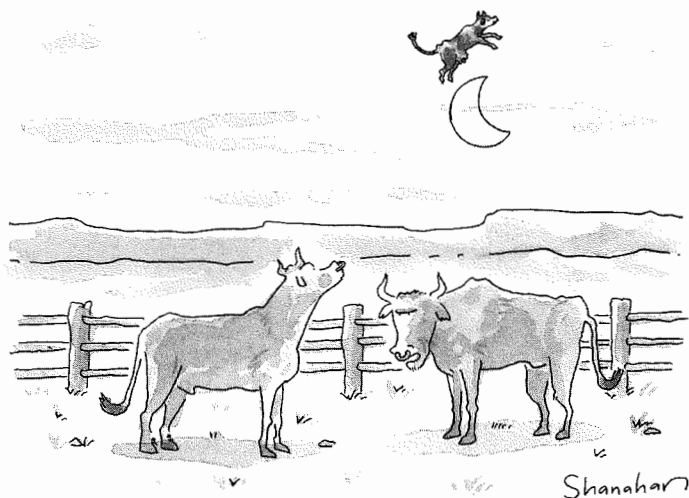
Child protective services worker

We may be unaware of our anger, even when all of our loved ones, colleagues, and clients have to tiptoe around us. Years ago, I was asked to give a keynote speech on trauma stewardship to a large gathering of U.S. Air Force personnel. When we began talking about anger, I encouraged the participants to do a bit of homework once they left the conference. I asked them to connect with a loved one whom they trusted and say to that person, "Tell me about my anger. Help me understand what it looks like, feels like, sounds like." I reminded them to not be defensive and to listen with an open heart and mind. There was widespread laughter. I said, "Hey, it's just a suggestion. Try it out." Several years later and thousands of miles away from that laughter-filled conference room, I was setting up to do a trauma stewardship workshop. A man who turned out to be in the Air Force approached me and said, "You know, I attended your talk several years ago and there was that section when you spoke about anger. When I got home, I asked my wife if she thought I was angry and what my

anger looked like to her. It has completely changed our relationship. I actually think that I now have a sense of my anger.”

If we are not comfortable with our own anger, our clients may find it impossible to process their anger with us. And there’s another concern—we frequently take our anger out on people and animals and situations that are not connected to what our anger is actually about. They become our scapegoats.

Often when individuals try to deal with their anger honestly, directly, and in a good-faith way, it can be so unnerving for those around them that they may be viewed as “a bitch” or labeled intimidating. I am reminded of my father-in-law, who visits frequently. I often have the opportunity to hear him talking with his colleagues over the phone. Born and raised on the East Coast, he is able to communicate his various levels of anger effectively, without being passive-aggressive, pretentious, or needing to apologize for being straightforward. For me it can be unsettling; for him it’s just Wednesday morning back East.



*“But she’ll come down eventually, and she’ll come down hard.”*

I’ve heard many people say, “I’m not an angry person. We’re not angry at our workplace. We don’t have anger issues,” and then they talk about how funny they are and how they’re a cynical bunch. While anger is a natural feeling and in and of itself does no harm, cynicism is a sophisticated coping mechanism for dealing with anger and other

intense feelings we may not know how to manage. Its undercurrent is anger, and yet it is often witty, quick, sharp, easy to laugh at, and incredibly alluring. Responsible humor is one thing, but cynical humor used to avoid dealing with feelings of anger is another. When cynicism is our main mode of humor, it can warp our sense of the world around us. As a character created by the American actress and comedian Lily Tomlin said, "I find it very hard to keep my cynicism up to the level of reality."

### ***Inability to Empathize/Numbing***

I feel emotionally asleep.

Executive director of an interpretation-services nonprofit

An inability to empathize with others, or feeling numb, often happens as a result of one's system being overwhelmed with incoming stimuli. Jon Conte, a professor of social work, clinician, and one of the forefathers of trauma exposure theory, says it is as if you are a sponge that is completely saturated and has never been wrung out. One can only take in so much.



*"Are you sure you're not confusing manic-depressive with awake-asleep?"*

A pattern we often see is that people will get to a state of numbness, and their body and spirit and psyche will naturally try to regain a state of feeling. By now, we may have numbed out such intense feelings that any hint of experiencing them again, or of having any kind of a strong emotional response, may be scary or distasteful or leave us feeling out of control. We may find ourselves crying at a television commercial or yelling at our dog or having feelings that are real and yet not necessarily congruent with the situation at hand. One colleague said, “If I let myself feel this, I don’t think I’ll be able to pick myself up off the ground.” And so we often welcome back the numbing and may even seek out ways to deepen it.

The body naturally employs a complicated mix of hormones and chemicals, sensory cues, and external stimuli to manufacture feelings. Feelings alert us to danger, aid in speedy decision making, focus our attention, and calm us down. We can override this system—that is, “numb out”—by amping up the production of feelings to the point that one is basically indistinguishable from another, or by shutting down the mechanisms for registering these feelings.

It goes from those “oh my God” moments when I used to read files to now they’re just another file. You never wanted to get to that point where you lose that “oh my God” moment because these are really, really horrible things I’m reading.

HIV/AIDS caseworker

Numbing is not difficult. We live in a society and often work for agencies with innumerable mechanisms that encourage numbing. We have all experienced the urge to numb ourselves. As one conservationist and natural resources educator who works in Latin America and the Caribbean shared, “Conservation is a difficult field to be in. Your senses are flooded by knowledge and feelings of loss. You work with people who are constantly fighting and constantly feeling like they are losing. I myself am much moodier than I used to be. I have to drink sometimes, especially when I am away from home working. I’m not much of a drinker, but it helps numb my feelings when they

make me anxious about how it isn't reconcilable."

Alcohol and over-the-counter, prescription, and street drugs are among the best-known tools for turning up the volume or shutting off the system. Similarly, overwork and overscheduling may cause our bodies to secrete adrenaline, a hormone that keeps us alert and racing around but may block our awareness of the feelings underneath. Dependence on caffeine and sugar may help us to feel better temporarily, but they also numb us to feelings of fatigue or craving.

My children say I don't play with them anymore. I don't sing anymore,  
I don't laugh anymore.

Family law attorney

In New Orleans I had lunch with Dina Benton. She is an extraordinary woman who lost her entire home in the hurricane and spent months driving around in her car, which was full of rescued possessions and her dog. She was one of the first civilians to return to her neighborhood after the storm, and several months later she got her job back with the Audubon Institute. She is now part of the team that will remain at the zoo, caring for the animals, should there be another severe storm.

When we met, Dina described the last 10 months of her life in a very even, rational way. As we were preparing to leave the restaurant, she ordered a cup of coffee and turned to me and said, with complete sincerity, "You know, that is one thing that I know is really different since Katrina. I drink around 14 cups of coffee a day now, and I never even drank coffee before. I have no idea why I drink so much coffee."

Whether from the rush of the amazing save or from a triple shot of espresso, once you know what it's like to be fueled by adrenaline on a consistent basis, it's hard to go back to a more measured and natural emotional state. We find that workplaces often adopt a very harried pace even when there's no crisis. Action for its own sake keeps people moving, makes them superficially productive, and limits their capacity for reflection about their lives. This becomes seductive, even to workers, because we can confuse being amped up, attending to crises (some of which we create), and having a sense of being needed

with being fully awake, living life, and being effective. It is interesting to hear what happens to people when they begin to slow down, pay attention to themselves, and take care of longer-term, root issues in their lives. Scott Douglas, an attorney and director of a volunteer legal services agency, shared this story with me recently:

My partner and I both work for social service agencies; I run a volunteer legal program and he works with at-risk youth. We live in a huge old house with a great big yard, and we love puttingter about, planting, pruning, and painting. However, there are always a million tasks to do on the house and yard, and anytime we're in any danger of running out, we make up new ones. Let's rip out this patch of lawn and reforest it with native conifers! That sort of thing.

A friend of ours lives across the street. One weekend morning he was leaning against his front door drinking coffee. He watched us scurry around like industrious squirrels hauling dirt and clippings, moving ladders, hanging laundry, mowing the lawn, planting flowers. Finally, he just shouted at the top of his lungs, "STOP DOING THINGS!" We were dumbfounded. What would that look like, not doing things? What would we do instead? What would happen to all the things we were not doing if we weren't doing them?

Workers have frequently told me about taking seven-day vacations and being sick for the first five days from an adrenaline crash. One person described having a panic attack "if I have more than two minutes alone in my apartment." A colleague once shared a story about how he and his wife, who had a managerial role at a hospital and who worked almost incessantly, took a vacation. For the duration of the week, she was unhappy. When he finally asked what was going on, she said, "You can't take me away for a week, strip me of all my coping mechanisms, and expect me to enjoy myself."

To allow ourselves to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It

destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

Thomas Merton, American Catholic theologian, poet, author, and social activist

## Addictions

I look at my watch and see what time it is and how long until I can have a glass of wine. I mean, somewhere in the world it's got to be cocktail hour.

Human rights advocate

A colleague once told me that she had worked for an understaffed domestic violence program where the only acceptable reason for refusing to drop everything and come back in for a crisis was having had a few drinks. Alcohol, the organization reasoned, might impair the worker's discernment. "As a result, when the volunteers took over for the night, there was a sort of pell-mell rush as each staff member raced home to start drinking before our phones began to ring for help. Only drunk were you off the hook."



*"Boy, I'm going to pay for this tomorrow at yoga class."*

Of course, this is an extreme example. The point is that people can find themselves using drugs, alcohol, and other distractions to check out—both from a job's expectations and from internal messages. For some people, this tendency to numb out—whether by rushing home

to drink or plugging into another violent video game or simply cultivating the ability to ignore your body's aches and pains—can graduate to addiction. There are many resources for help, and addressing the consequences of trauma exposure can help to lessen the fear of encountering the world in a feeling and present way.

An addiction is an attachment so strong that it persists despite our understanding of its potentially destructive nature. There are the classic addictions: drugs, alcohol, food, sex. But we can also be addicted to the rush of adrenaline—it's so tempting to stay wired when the alternative is to slow down enough to feel what is going on within and around us. There are so many ways to get hooked. It can be helpful to ask ourselves, "What am I most attached to? What do I count on to help me numb out? What would I be really resistant to giving up in my life?" As the eighth-century Indian Buddhist scholar Shantideva once said, "We shrink from suffering, but we love its causes."

I smoke two cigarettes whenever I leave the clinic. That's when I started smoking.

Health care worker

An intriguing example of this is overwork, which for many of us becomes an addiction. It keeps our gaze down and our attention glued to our next step. We don't shift our gaze to observe the full range of what is in front of us. It can be hard and unpleasant to turn away from the sense of urgency we feel at work to focus on our personal life, where we may be held accountable as a peer, a community member, a partner, a parent, a son, or a daughter. Although people may not recognize it, the decision to work more and attend to their personal lives less is often a choice. One transitional housing worker shared, "My family is a real drain on me. I remind them that there are other people they can call on and other places they can go for support. I have enough to take care of with my work."

Our ego is a related addiction we often overlook, at least when it is linked to our culture of productivity-based identity. Many new stay-at-home mothers and fathers feel this when the rush of their work and its ego-boosting elements drop away. They're at home doing

a job that is incredibly important to the world, and yet they feel as if they're not doing anything important at all. This experience is reinforced by a mainstream view that says, "We are what we do" and get paid for, not "We are simply who we are."



*"I'm slowly weaning myself off employment."*

Addictions can be particularly compelling for those whose work feels absolutely too intense to integrate. I once heard the word *equanimity* defined as "having space within for everything." Our internal space must be expansive enough that we can sit with the sorrow in life even as we can feel the miracle of it all. When our work is overwhelming, we can feel so overloaded that we don't have room for the pain and suffering of those we serve. What we have witnessed can feel like it is breathing down our necks, desperate to find shelter inside of us. As individuals and as a culture, we can become addicted to escape. When we believe that we lack the inner capacity to deal with our reality, we may seek out objects, activities, or relationships that will help us to perpetuate an illusion about ourselves, numb us out, or otherwise give us distance from overwhelming feelings.

While perhaps the things we use to block our experience are effective in the short term, over time we require more and more of

them to effectively numb us out. At some point, the barrier we've tried to create against feeling our emotions is no longer adequately fortified by our addictions, and it ruptures. In comes everything we've been trying to avoid—but we're less equipped to deal with it than we would have been originally, because we invested in addictions instead of in sustainable coping skills.

### ***Grandiosity: An Inflated Sense of Importance Related to One's Work***

Throughout the hospital, the only social workers who connected so strongly with their work, as if it was their total identity, were the ER social workers. They are the only group that if you asked them, every one of them would say, "I'm an ER social worker." It was their whole identity.

Hospital administrator

When work becomes the center of our identity, it may be because it feeds our sense of grandiosity. This can be particularly challenging to acknowledge. Many people get hooked on involvement in others' lives: solving their problems, becoming a powerful figure for them, getting increasingly attached to the feeling of being needed and useful. The same dynamic may apply to people who are working with animals or the environment. If our work is breathtakingly important, so are we.

I have found that this form of grandiosity often keeps people in their work much longer than is perhaps best for them. You think, "Who else will do it if I'm not here?" or "I can't possibly leave, they're relying on me." While there may be some truth to this, it gets problematic when we're not firmly grounded in a larger reality. We need to acknowledge the value of what we bring without making our work be all about us. Once we cross that line, it can be difficult to come back. We can lose an accurate sense of our individual capacities and limits as well as our actual interdependence with others working in our fields. One animal activist said, "I am endlessly impressed by the stamina of some of my fellow animal rescuers. Although in some I

recognize the telltale signs of the familiar rescuer messiah complex—the distracted movements, the permanent worry lines.”



*“Must you precede everything you say with ‘This is your captain speaking?’”*

Admittedly, many people feel content with an identity based solely on work, particularly when that work is exclusively focused on others. Work gives us an excuse not to focus on ourselves, our relationships, or our lives, which may be precarious or falling apart. It is important to remember, however, that if we concentrate all of our energy on one area of our lives, we are likely to be compromising ourselves elsewhere. Ginny NiCarthy, a foremother of the domestic violence movement in the United States and the author of several revolutionary books on violence against women, described the tension she encountered when balancing multiple identities: “There I was, neglecting my own children while I was out trying to change the world.”

Karyn Schwartz, an herbalist and a healer based in Seattle, Washington, describes why she sings. Despite the many demands on her time, she makes sure to perform as often as she can—in nightclubs, cabarets, and classical choirs. “A lot—maybe most—of

what I do as an assistant to people's healing is invisible. I don't own anyone's well-being. If I am doing my job well, nobody feels that I am doing much at all, and I become quickly obsolete, because it's their journey, not mine. I sing because that is how I pray; I perform because I need to be applauded. All of us need appreciation, and sometimes in this kind of work the invisibility can start to feel depleting. In order to stay honest about my own need for accolades, and in order to nourish my own capacity to remain generous with my energy, I make sure to tend to the part of myself that needs to be a big diva. If I don't, I run the risk, as we all do, of relying too much on my work for my sense of esteem. When that happens, I can start to feel dependent on other people's suffering and their need for me to relieve it, for my own feeling of purpose. It's hard, in that dynamic, to honestly encourage someone else to be truly whole."

It can be very hard to reduce our identification with work, let alone break the addiction to overwork that often results. These ways of being are feverishly supported in certain societies. When I lived in Guatemala, I'd often be invited to sit with someone's family in a small indigenous community, high up in the mountains, and talk with them for hours. They posed many questions, but never once was I asked, "What do you do?" In Central America, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, and throughout Europe, people ask where you live, how your family is, what crops grow near your home, what you think of their country, and so on, but not about what you do for a living.

Having been raised in the United States, where this is generally one of the top three questions we ask upon meeting new people, I marveled at what it means *not* to ask this question. In the United States, we are obsessed with work; it is a cornerstone of our self-image. This difference in perspective may help to explain why workers elsewhere in the world rarely exude the same exhaustion that we do in the United States. Perhaps their cultures make it easier for them to maintain a larger identity that is distinct from their work. Their understanding that what they do is not who they are may allow them a freedom that our grandiosity about work does not afford us.