

# On a High Wire: Helping Professionals, Trauma and Resilience

By Kyle D. Killian

New study highlights importance of measuring and promoting vicarious resilience.

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Walking into the presentation room at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, I was greeted by a young woman who smiled, shook my hand, and chirped, "Hi, I'm \_\_\_\_\_ of Victim Services." Her energy and enthusiasm for her work, and life, was palpable, and contagious. In a way, she embodied the essence of the concept I was there to speak on: *vicarious resilience*, the positive effects of witnessing clients' healing and recovery from terrible traumas.

The work helping professionals do with trauma survivors, while a source of joy and reward, is also often quite difficult. The traumatic experiences clients have faced can be horrendous, and our secondary exposure to, or vicarious traumatization from, the things that human beings do to one another can be emotionally disruptive, shaking our worldviews. Our senses of safety, both our own and that of others, as well as capacity to trust others, can be altered by trauma work. In addition to this, a high percentage of professionals are themselves trauma survivors, including the cheerful woman from Victim Services.

It's no surprise that there is high turnover in the professions of social work, counseling and clinical psychology. Compassion fatigue and [burnout](#) are prevalent in the helping professions, and attention given to these phenomena is important for clinical programs, agencies and organizations hoping to train and sustain the next generation of professionals. But Radey and Figley (2007) asserted, "Too often we focus on disorders, psychopathology, dysfunction, and problems. We must balance these negative elements with a focus on altruism, compassion, resilience, success, and thriving." In response, I developed along with my colleagues Pilar Hernandez, David Engstrom and David Gangsei (2017) a scale to measure Vicarious Resilience (VR), the positive ways in which professionals may be impacted by clients' resilience, healing and recovery from severe traumas. In brief, the Vicarious Resilience Scale is a reliable, valid measure of *seven domains* of growth and change associated with VR:

(1) Changes in life goals and perspective (e.g., life direction, priorities, connection with others, etc.);

(2) Client inspired hope (increased recognition of clients' capacities and resources for healing and recovery, and being inspired by these capacities);

- (3) Increased recognition of clients' spirituality as a therapeutic resource;
- (4) Increased self-awareness and self-care practice;
- (5) Increased consciousness about power and privilege relative to clients' social location;
- (6) Increased capacity for resilience and resourcefulness; and
- (7) Increased capacity to remain present during clients' trauma narratives.

As a strengths-focused construct, we can use VR to counteract processes in which professionals can come to see themselves as burdened by trauma narratives, or feel "contaminated" by vicarious traumatization (VT). Learning to attend to both VT and VR supports the health and strength of those who choose to work in contexts where brutal pain is always present. And one way to keep an eye on our [stress](#) level, and to gauge our wellbeing and resilience, is by taking the time to check in with ourselves ([meditate](#), yoga, [mindfulness](#), etc.), engage in self-care practices, and to measure our vicarious resilience.

As I left the workshop, the young woman from Victim Services handed me her card. Along with her credentials and affiliations, it also said she was an *aerialist*, or high wire performer. When I smiled, she asked, in a kidding way, "Are you making fun of me?" I said, "No, no, it's perfect. Your energy, your enthusiasm, and the risks you take in your professional life every day working with victims—no, it's perfect." She does a high wire act on a daily basis, but from our conversation, I strongly suspect she works with a net--of social support, and of [self care](#). She exemplifies many of the characteristics of vicariously resilient helping professionals. May we all, like her, take care of ourselves and be able to continue to do the work that we love.

Kyle D. Killian, PhD is author of [Interracial Couples, Intimacy & Therapy: Crossing Racial Borders](#) from Columbia University Press.

#### References

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