



## COPING AND SELF-CARE AFTER TRAUMA AND TRAGEDY

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and their legacy of trauma and tragedy have left a lasting impact on our lives. Some in our legal community, and the community that our profession serves, suffered immediate personal losses. All of us lost a sense of safety and security that we enjoyed and took for granted before the devastating terrorist attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. This loss is felt acutely as related events continue to unfold each day.

### STRESS REACTIONS

The emotional impact of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy and the events that are now occurring varies for each of us. The range of feelings is wide – including numbness, a sense of disconnection, fear, anxiety, sadness, depression, irritability or anger. Some of these feelings may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as headaches, insomnia, or even nausea – any of which can further impact your ability to function. You may find yourself stepping back and taking stock of your personal and professional life. Generally these reactions are appropriate and normal given the events that have occurred. It takes time to adjust. Sometimes, however, reactions to traumatic events can be severe or long lasting. According to an article by John D. Weaver, LCSW, BCD, ACSW, CBHE, the following people are at a higher risk for a strong reaction to traumatic stress:

- Those who are most caring/empathetic
- Those who are the least well defended emotionally
- Those who tend to become overly involved
- Those in the most emotionally charged settings
- Those with unresolved personal issues

- Those who have recently experienced other losses and are grieving
- Those who are the least trained, supervised, and/or supported
- Those who do not practice good self-care or stress management
- Trauma specialists, especially those who may think they are immune

If you have had a previous traumatic event in your life, you may also develop a strong stress reaction to new trauma. People who have had a traumatic event occur in their life and who then develop a strong stress reaction to a new trauma, may be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of an ongoing stress reaction experienced by a trauma survivor or witness may include:

- Persistently experiencing the traumatic event through flashbacks, dreams, or intrusive distressing recollections;
- Experiencing increased alertness, hypervigilance or arousal not present before the trauma;
- Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma;
- Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others, or anhedonia (being unable to experience pleasure from activities that had previously provided enjoyment or pleasure).

Attorneys, who work with victims and survivors of trauma as a regular part of their profession, can also develop symptoms of PTSD as a result of their constant exposure to information about trauma. Family law, juvenile law, indigent criminal defense, workers' compensation, and personal injury are examples of practice areas that may make a lawyer vulnerable to the phenomena of vicarious trauma and may place the lawyer at a higher risk of reacting strongly to additional dramatic or traumatic events.

### **BASIC SELF-CARE**

There are things that you can do when confronted with traumatic stress:

- Eat a healthy and balanced diet to significantly improve your ability to cope with high levels of stress. Limit your use of caffeine, alcohol, junk food, and sugar.
- Maintain as much of your daily routines as possible, including eating regular meals, exercising, and sleeping at least as much as you normally do.
- Break tasks down into small steps and work systematically through those rather than focusing on the big picture. Take regular breaks at work.
- Seek support / don't isolate yourself. Maintain connections with your colleagues, family and friends. Discuss how you feel about the disaster or trauma and also talk about other topics.
- Share the tough cases with others in the office and balance your workload, if possible.
- Maintain boundaries between work and the other parts of your life.
- Explore your interests and hobbies. Don't spend all of your spare time and energy reading all the news reports or watching all of the media broadcasts that detail the lives of those who were lost. This could result in over-identifying with the trauma and result in increased vicarious stress symptoms.
- Set aside time to maintain your spirituality.

### **WHEN TO GET HELP**

After experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event, it is normal to experience a strong reaction. If your symptoms last longer than four to six weeks or significantly impair your ability to function personally or professionally, you should seek help. The OAAP is available as a counseling and referral resource to all lawyers interested in obtaining assistance.