

EXPOSURE TO THE WORST:

WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

FROM

CHILD MALTREATMENT INVESTIGATORS

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ABOUT ME

Criminologist & professor
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Idaho Coalition Against Sexual
& Domestic Violence

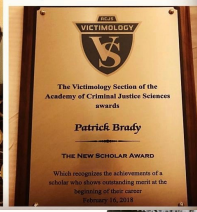
Subject matter expertise:

- Domestic violence
- (Cyber)stalking
- Non-fatal strangulation
- Job strain: Vicarious trauma & Burnout

Youth offenders & crime victims



Justin Nix liked
ACJS Victimology @ACJS_VS · 25m
Dr. Patrick Brady received the New Scholar Award from our Victimology Division for 2018. His victimology research, particularly on stalking, is already having an impact of the field. Congrats Dr. Brady! @Patrickology.



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THE COST OF CARING

Child maltreatment investigators are at the highest risk for secondary traumatic stress (STS)¹

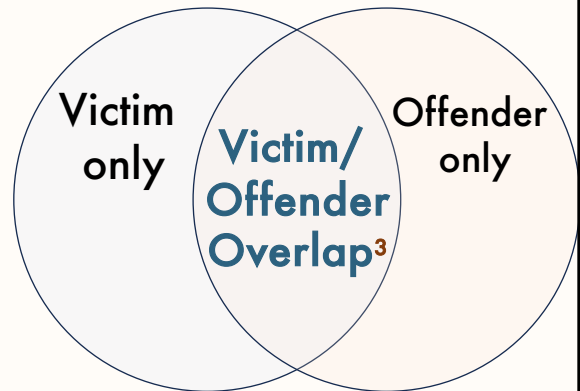
24% - 62%
experience high burnout²⁻⁴



¹Sprang et al., 2011; ²Anderson, 2000; ³Brady, 2017; ⁴Conrad & Keller-Guenther, 2006

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COST OF CARING EXTENDS TO PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH OFFENDING POPULATIONS¹⁻²



¹Frost & Scott (2022); ²Baum & Moyal, 2020; ³Jennings et al. (2010)

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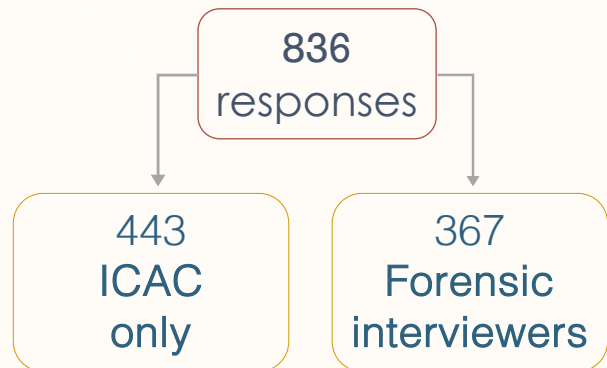
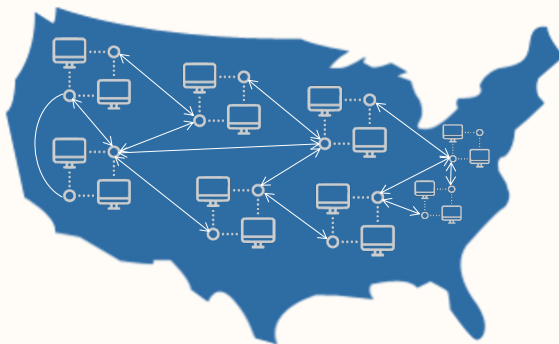
HOW TO PEOPLE DO THIS WORK WHILE REMAINING SANE?!!!

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USING DATA TO ANSWER MY CONCERNS

Online survey administered via two listservs in May 2012¹⁻³
Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Members(ICAC)

Forensic Interviewers with Child Advocacy Centers



¹Brady (2017); ²Brady et al. (2019); ³Fansher, Zedaker, & Brady (2020)

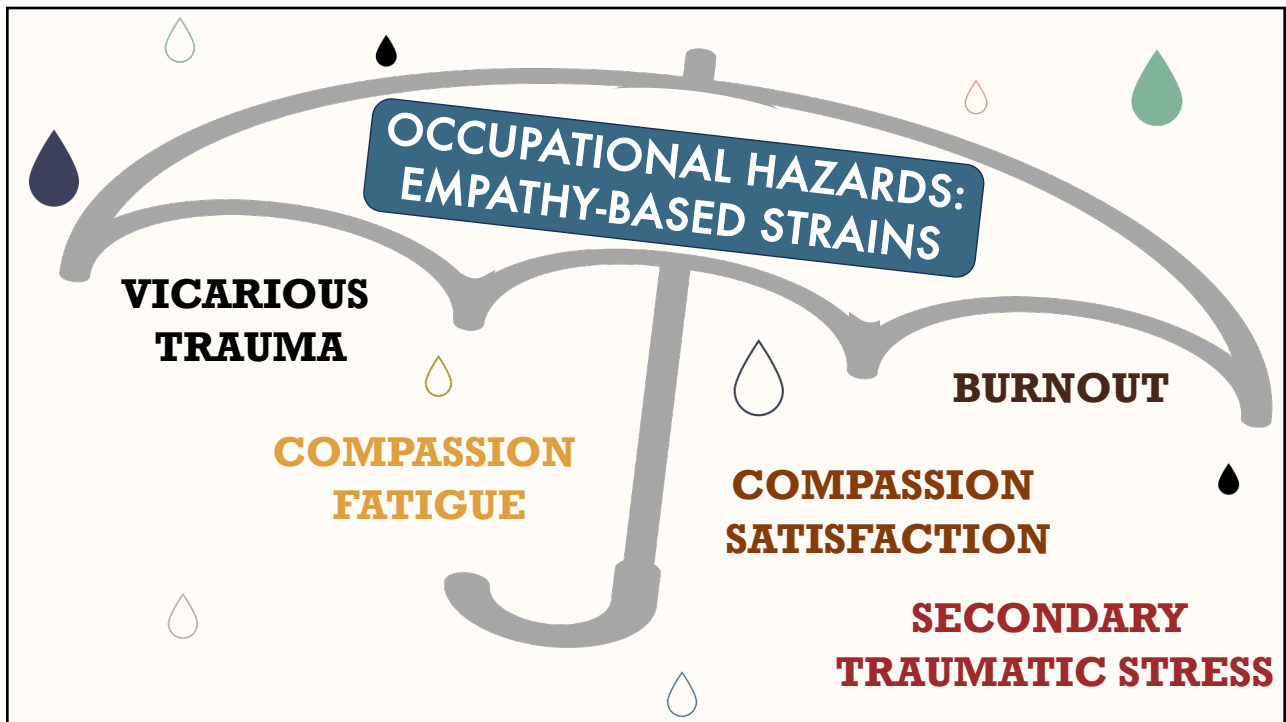
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- What vicarious trauma is and how it can render us vulnerable to job-related strains like burnout

- How vicarious trauma impacts relationships with friends, family, and children

- How investigators cope and what they need from their agency and supervisors

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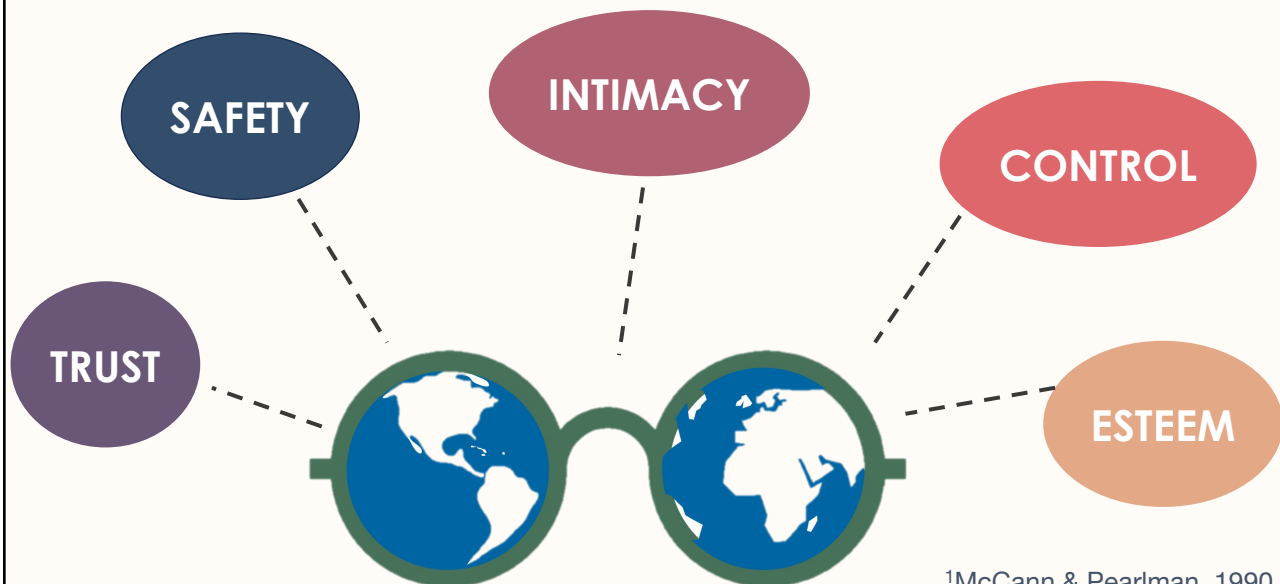
VICARIOUS TRAUMA

The **negative transformation** of a helping professional's **cognitive view of themselves, others, or the world** as the result of **prolonged, indirect exposures to graphic materials and/or narratives of traumatic events**

McCann & Pearlman, 1990

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VICARIOUS TRAUMA



¹McCann & Pearlman, 1990

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VICARIOUS TRAUMA

What is the hardest part about doing this work?

"How it changed my view of safety in society."

- Forensic Interviewer

"The hardest thing in the beginning was walking through a store or into a school while off duty and not looking at every child as a potential victim, comparing their face to the ones I have seen during investigations."

- Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force Member

"Knowing things about my children's friends and their parents"

- Forensic Interviewer

"I'm more suspicious of people. I dislike public pools and people with cameras who seem to be taking pictures of kids/people they don't know"

- ICAC Task Force Member

Brady (2017)

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COMPASSION FATIGUE

Negative emotions and behaviors resulting from **knowing about a traumatizing event** and **having limited resources/capacity to help**

Aka the cost of caring

Figley, 1999

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COMPASSION FATIGUE

What is the hardest part about doing this work?

"Not being able to "fix" things for my clients; realizing that some children are born into horrible circumstances and that their chances of completely escaping the poverty, violence and misery surrounding them are small"

- Forensic Interviewer

"It never ends. No matter how many cases we "solve" it doesn't seem to make a dent in the overall picture."

- Sex crimes investigator

"I often feel helpless because I have to watch movie files of some scumbag sexually assaulting a child and I can't do anything to stop it. I can only put the guy in prison who possesses or distributes the material and that's **IF** the DA files charges. That's my biggest frustration with this line of work"

Brady (2017)

- ICAC Task Force Member

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SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

A form of post-traumatic stress manifesting through frequent, indirect exposure to graphic materials/traumatized clients as the result of one's work-related responsibilities



HYPERVIGILANCE



AVOIDANCE

Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)

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SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

What is the hardest part about doing this work?

“What I hear and what I see wears me out”

-Sex crimes investigator

“Sitting in the presence of, and being very present for, the trauma of others. Constant reminders of the very terrible things people do to children, and knowing (really knowing) that there are scared children being hurt in the world right now.”

-Forensic Interviewer

“Having intrusive thoughts about the disclosures we here from children and letting that effect my personal sex life.”

-Forensic Interviewer

“Listening to people outside my work complain about their problems when I have seen really problems and horrible situations. Sometimes I just want to grab someone complaining about something and scream at them, ‘Were you raped by your step-dad today? THEN SHUT UP!!!!!!!’”

- ICAC Task Force Member

Brady (2017)

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POST vs. SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

PRIMARY TRAUMA

Direct exposure to trauma

Trauma is happening to person

Person is:

In harms way; and/or
Overwhelmed by horror/terror of situation

SECONDARY TRAUMA

Indirect exposure to trauma
(e.g., hearing/seeing trauma)

Person is *not* in danger

Person is *not* at the scene of the traumatic event

- ✓ Intrusive thoughts
- ✓ Avoidance
- ✓ Hypervigilance

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BURNOUT

Chronic form of psychological strain characterized by

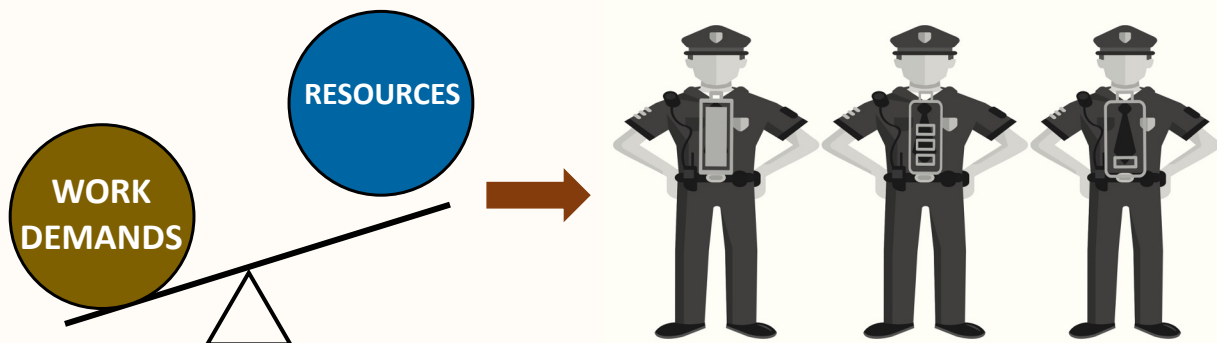
Exhaustion: *Persistent* physical, emotional, cognitive exhaustion; and/or

Disengagement: distancing themselves from their work, negative attitudes towards, work, people, and/or the industry as a whole

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BURNOUT

Stems from an imbalance of home/work life demands versus the resources available to manage stressors



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BURNOUT

What is the hardest part about doing this work?

“I find that the length of the investigations, the amount of paperwork generated, the volume of evidence, and the ever-changing technology we have to be trained are the hardest things”
-ICAC Task Force Member

“Dealing with the after-effects of working these cases, and equally difficult, the lack of other investigators in my office and the lack of proper equipment/training to do this job.”
-ICAC Task Force Member

“Dealing with supervisors who don’t have a clue what you do and add stress to the work environment”
-Forensic Interviewer

“Finding the energy to keep giving and going forward. Not having support from the organization in which I work in terms of adequate training on compassion fatigue and self care, too many cases, etc.”
-Forensic Interviewer

Brady (2017)

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	Vicarious Trauma	Secondary Traumatic Stress	Burnout
ONSET	Cumulative/gradual	Immediate	Cumulative/gradual
SYMPTOMS	Permanent shift in cognitive schemas	Mirrors PTSD	Exhaustion & disengagement
CAUSES	Empathic relationships with multiple interactions/exposure to trauma experiences/materials	Indirect exposure to graphic materials/trauma narratives as the result of work-related duties	Work environments where job demands outweigh resources
REMEDIES	Prevention; Treatment of self, similar to trauma treatment	Prevention; Treatment of self, similar to trauma treatment	Time away from work; Activities to recharge; positive change in work environment

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COMPASSION SATISFACTION

The **enjoyment** one receives from **building positive relationships with others** and **having the capacity to do their job well**

Stamm (2010)

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COMPASSION SATISFACTION

Brady (2017)

What helps you most in coping with your work?

"I try to focus on my "piece of the puzzle" (forensic interviewing and court testimony), do it really well, continually develop my skills, and remember that I'm making a difference. I try to let the rest go, and that helps me separate my work from my non-work life. I also believe that we, in the child abuse field, are helping the children who need us, even if that difference is sometimes difficult to see." -Forensic interviewer

"Realizing that I can't save the world, but I can HELP save some
-ICAC Task Force Member

"The satisfaction I will get when a case is closed knowing I did my part. And, the people I work with. They are supportive."

-Forensic Interviewer

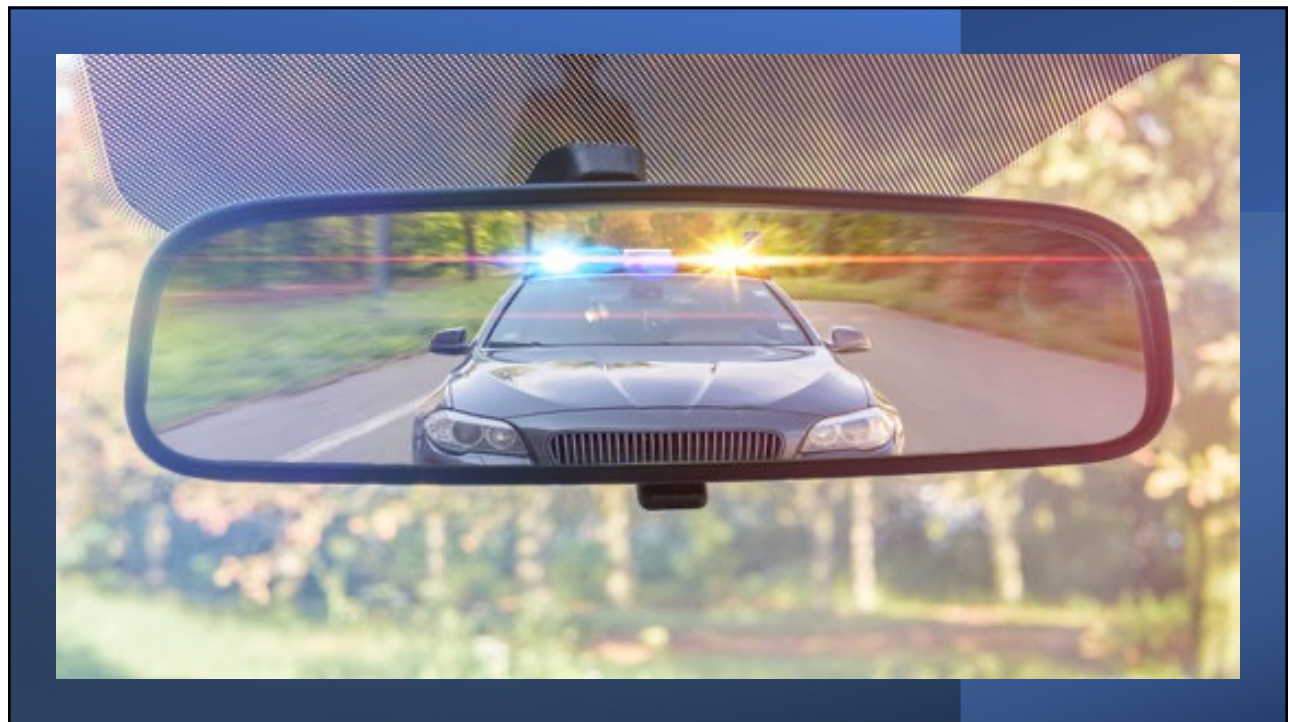
"Knowing that by simply listening, showing empathy and respect that I am helping this one child. If a child feels heard, cared for and respected then they I have done what is in my power to do, and I take comfort in that. I also have a lot of love in my family relations and my husband is in a similar field, so he and I can debrief in certain ways too. (and I don't mean that I take his briefs off...ok, well maybe sometimes! See! I said I need humor to get by...) -Forensic Interviewer

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**JOB
DEMANDS &
STRESSORS**

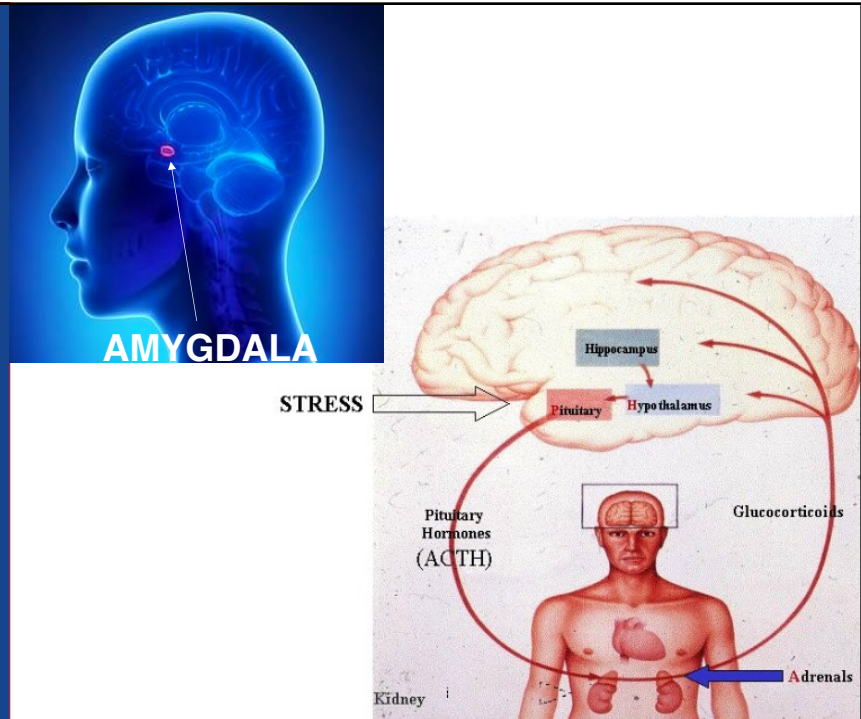
Job Stress –
**our ability to adapt
when environmental
threats overwhelm
personal, financial, &
emotional resources**

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WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR BODIES DURING STRESS?



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Stress is not always bad!

Consequences of stress depends on:

The nature of the stressor(s)

Extent of exposure

The ability to adequately restore our bodies back to equilibrium

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JOB DEMANDS & STRESSORS

ORGANIZATIONAL
Paperwork Bureaucratic
Supervision red tape

OPERATIONAL
Trauma Job
exposure stigma

LIMITED RESOURCES
Support Staffing

Job Stress –
our ability to adapt when environmental threats overwhelm personal, financial, & emotional resources

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JOB DEMANDS & STRESSORS → **JOB STRAINS**

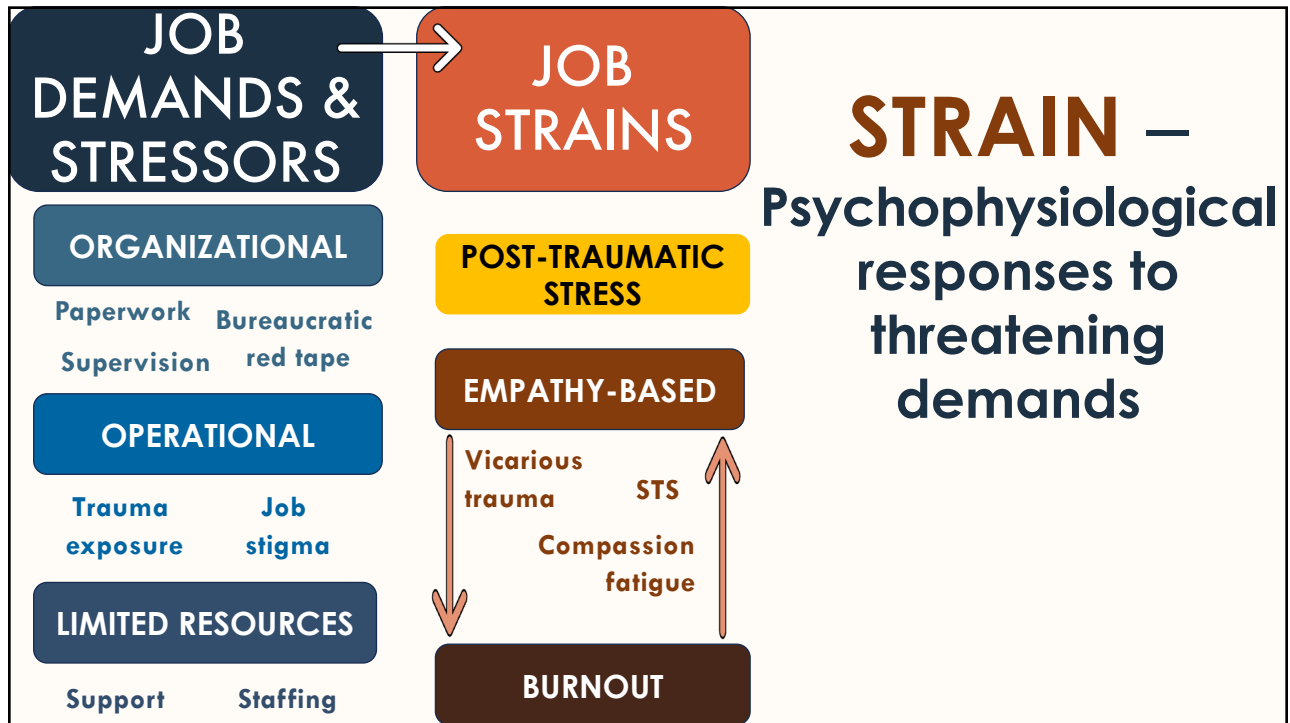
ORGANIZATIONAL
Paperwork Bureaucratic
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Trauma Job
exposure stigma

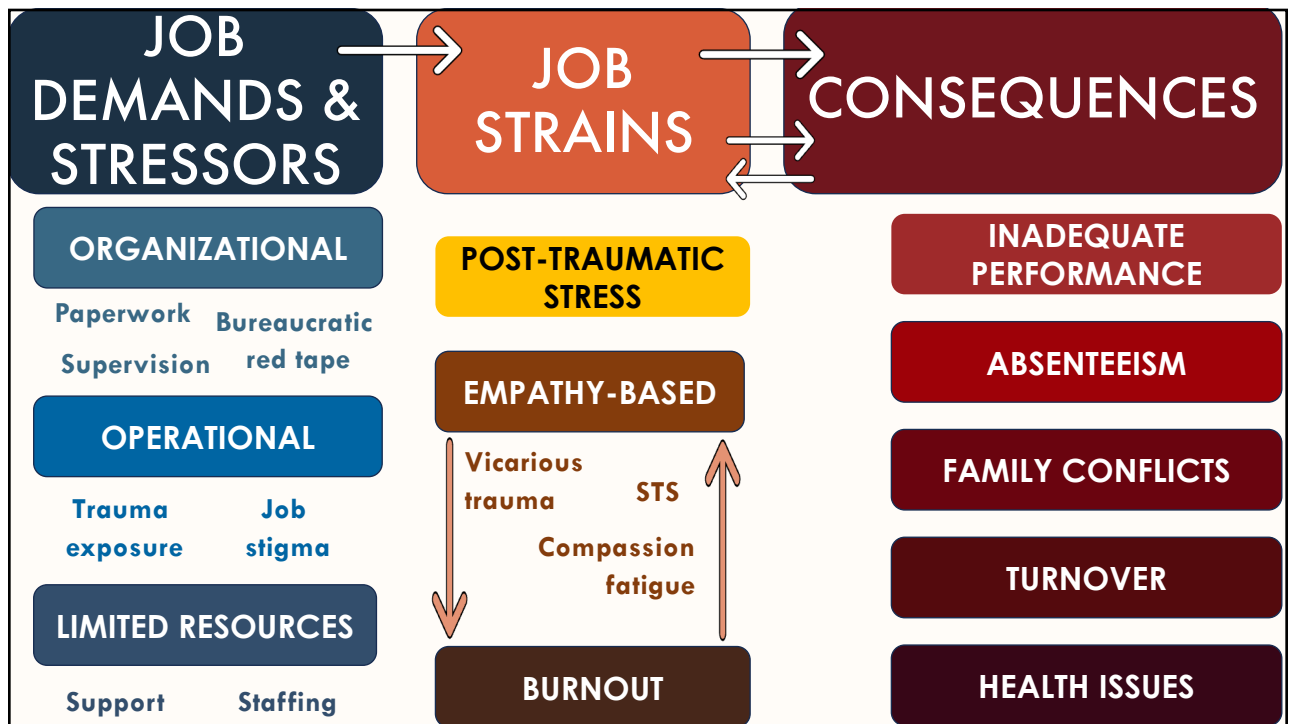
LIMITED RESOURCES
Support Staffing

STRAIN –
Psychophysiological responses to threatening demands

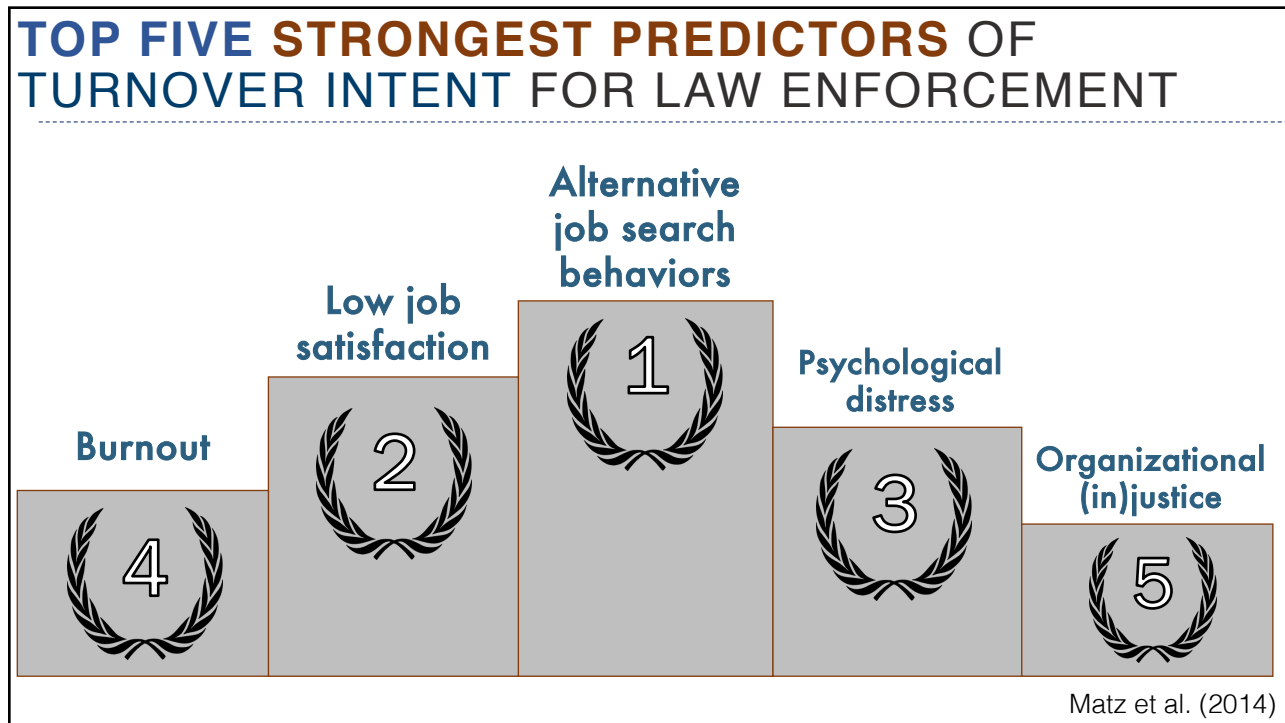
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WARNING SIGNS OF EMPATHY-BASED STRESS

Physical	Behavioral	Emotional/Psychological
Exhaustion	Increased substance use	Anxiety
Insomnia	Absenteeism	Depression
Getting sick more often	Irritability	Overprotection of loved ones
Gastrointestinal issues	Isolation	Emotionally distant
headaches	Avoidance behaviors	Hypervigilance
	Impulsive	Increasingly cynical
	Aggressive/unethical behavior	Intrusive thoughts
	Problems in personal relationships	Reduced professional accomplishment
		Reduced empathy
		Suicide ideation

Common features: Dramatic changes in the person's behavior and personality

¹Best Start Resource Centre, 2012; Cherniss, 1980; Figley, 1995; IACP, 2013; Matheiu, 2012; Maslach & Jackson, 1982

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FACTORS INCREASING RISK FOR EMPATHY-BASED STRESS

Personal	Work-Related
History of personal trauma	High caseloads
Less work experience	Higher degree of exposure to graphic materials/trauma
Limited out-of-work support	Low collegial and organizational support
Personality (e.g., Type A; over-achiever; star employee)	Lack of quality supervision
Younger	Excessive demands and limited resources
Single/unmarried	Lack of recognition
Females working with victims	Greater family work-conflict (family issues create conflict at work)
Males working with offenders	Greater work-family conflict (work-issues creating conflict in home life)
	Gallows/Dark/Black humor at the expense of victims

Arvay & Uhlemann, 1996; Bourke & Craun, 2014; Brady, 2017; Craun et al., 2015; Frost & Scott, 2022; Hensel et al., 2015; Perez et al., 2010

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What vicarious trauma is and how it can render us vulnerable to job-related strains like burnout

Stress-based empathy stems from **frequent, indirect exposures** to graphic materials/traumatic experiences

Allostatic load (wear & tear from **excessive stress hormones in body**) responsible for many of the negative outcomes of stress-based empathy

Time to allow body and mind to **regain balance is key**

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~~What vicarious trauma is and how it can render us vulnerable to job-related strains like burnout~~



How vicarious trauma impacts relationships with friends, family, and children



How investigators cope and what they need from their agency and supervisors

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POLICING ON PERSONAL LIVES OF OFFICERS

Family members notice changes in officers' personalities & behaviors over time¹

Family members absorb work-related stress & emotional distress²

Greater stress & work-family conflict negatively impacts marital satisfaction & functioning³⁻⁴



Stress from family life impacts work-related attitudes/behaviors⁵

¹Twesky-Glasner (2005); ²Burke (1993); ³Minnotte et al. (2015); ⁴Tuttle et al. (2018); ⁵Boles et al. 2001

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Being a parent
does NOT
increase risk
for STS

This work does
impact
relationships
with friends
and family

Are parents at a higher risk for secondary traumatic stress?: How interviewing child victims impacts relationships with forensic interviewer's friends and family



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Keywords:
Secondary traumatic stress
Forensic interviewer
Parental status
External social support
Burnout

ABSTRACT

Background: Forensic interviewers are at a heightened risk for secondary traumatic stress (STS) due to their frequent interactions with victims of child maltreatment (Bonach & Heckert, 2012). To date, however, few studies have examined the negative effects of this work on interviewers' social and emotional well-being.

Objective: The present study seeks to explore the effect of STS on the relationships of forensic interviewers, including those with friends, family, and their respective children.

Participants and setting: Data are derived from a sample of 367 forensic interviewers (FIs) recruited from across the United States.

Methods: The current study used a cross-sectional research design to obtain qualitative and quantitative data from an online survey of certified forensic interviewers.

Results: Personal-level predictors of STS included interviewers' sex ($\beta = 0.11, p = 0.02$), trauma history ($\beta = 0.13, p = 0.004$), and frequency of socializing with family members outside of work ($\beta = -0.12, p = 0.01$). Work-related predictors included the frequency of direct ($\beta = 0.10, p = 0.04$) and indirect exposures to graphic details of child maltreatment ($\beta = 0.09, p = 0.05$), burnout ($\beta = 0.58, p = 0.000$), and years of experience investigating crimes against children ($\beta = 0.10, p = 0.03$). Factors such as parental status and external social support were not significantly associated with STS in the qualitative analysis.

Conclusions: Forensic interviewers experience both positive and negative effects of exposure to crimes against children, with work-related factors being particularly impactful on the potential for STS.

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RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

Among parents,

69%

of child maltreatment investigators stated this work has impacted relationships with their own children



Brady et al. (2019)

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POSITIVE EFFECTS OF WORK ON RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN

No effect (8%)

Improved caretaker skills

Increased bonds with children

Brady et al., (2019)

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POSITIVE EFFECTS OF WORK ON RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN

No effect	Ask more open-ended questions about their day Better listener Using correct anatomical language early on
Improved caretaker skills (16%)	
Increased bonds with children	

Brady et al., (2019)

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POSITIVE EFFECTS OF WORK ON RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN

No effect	<i>“Since being assigned to this position, my daughters have disclosed that they were victims of sexual abuse by their step-father. Due to my training, I was able to get them the help they needed with my colleagues and now the person is going to prison! My daughters’ biological mother was also convicted of endangerment, based on the investigation.”</i>
Improved caretaker skills	
Increased bonds with children (7%)	

Male investigator, 0-5 years experience; (3) children

Brady et al., (2019)

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NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF WORK ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

Decreased trust
(38%)

Avoidance

Other negative effects

"My work has made me extremely paranoid when it comes to allowing anyone access to my children. This strains our relationship because they believe I don't trust them when in actuality, I don't trust others with my children"

Male investigator, 6-10 years experience; (2) children

Brady et al., (2019)

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NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF WORK ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

Decreased trust
(38%)

Avoidance

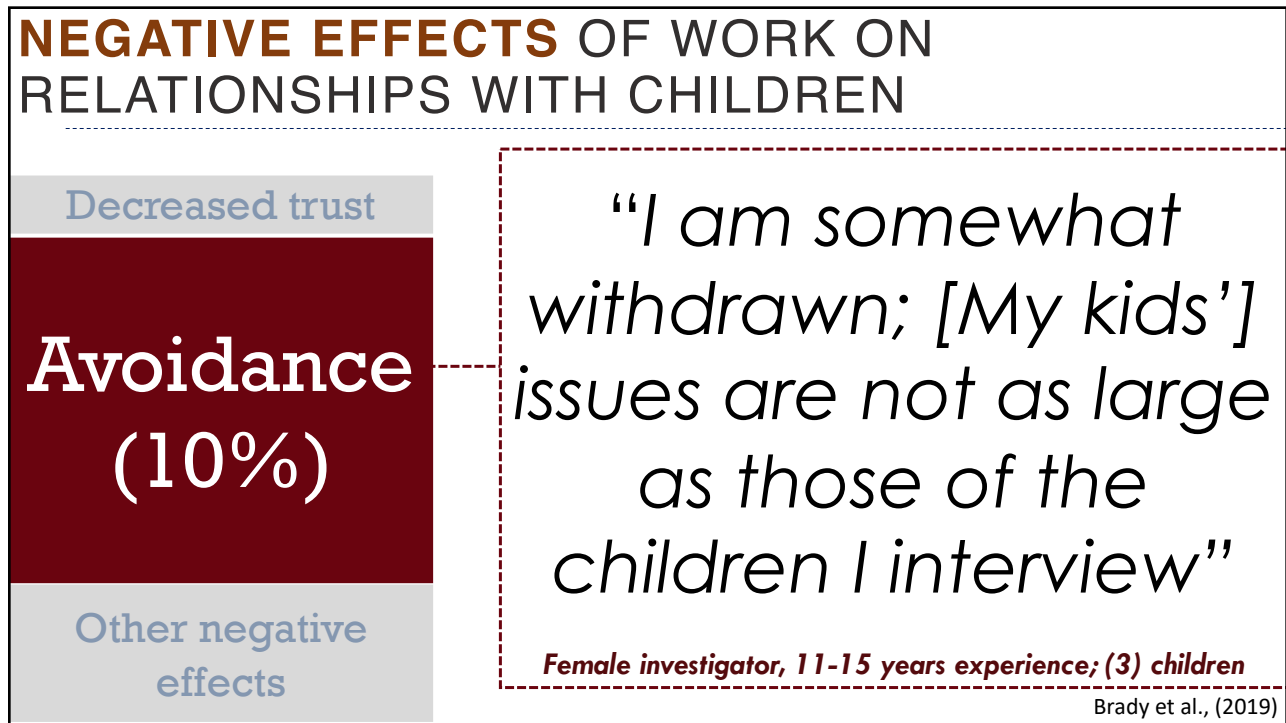
Other negative effects

"I am more controlling & protective of them. My children don't do sleep-overs or go to people's homes (unless I am there). [My kids] get frustrated by the lack of freedom when they see how much their peers get to do without parents."

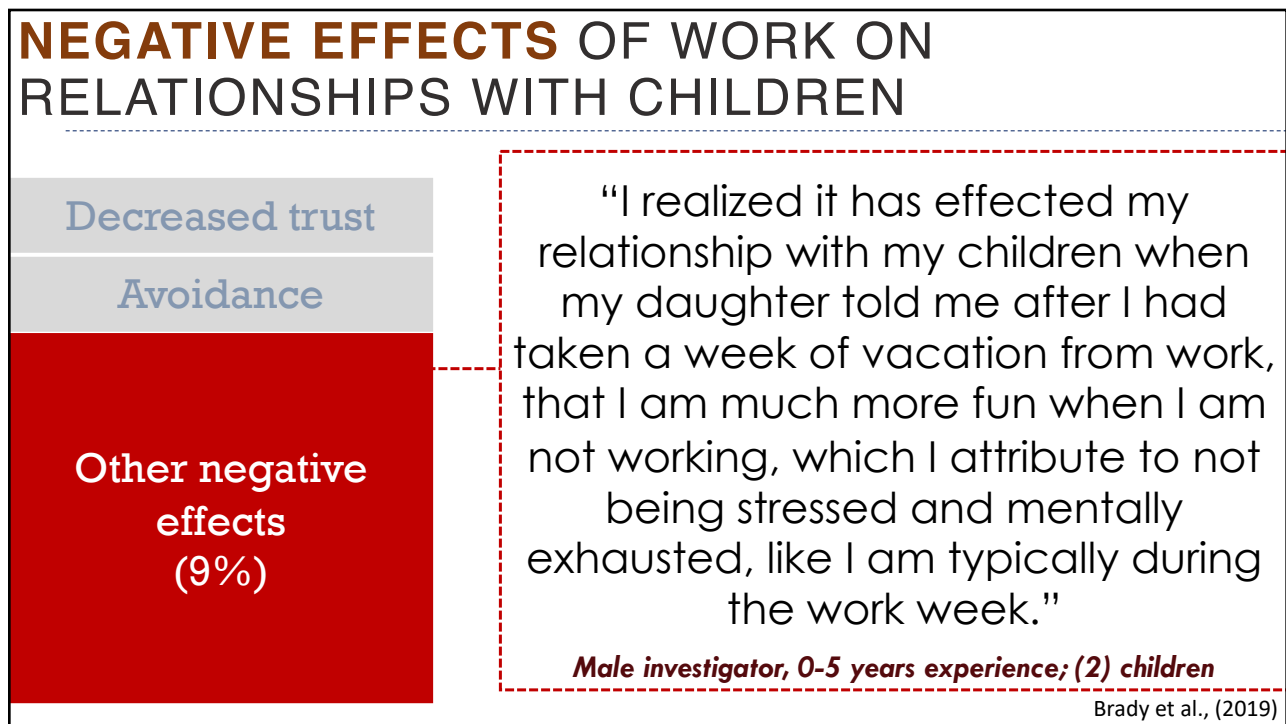
Female investigator, 0-5 years experience; (3) children

Brady et al., (2019)

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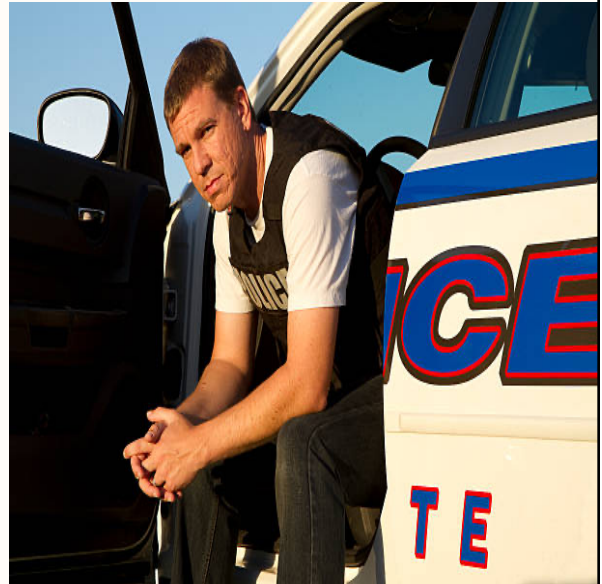
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RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

Among child maltreatment investigators,

82%

stated this work has impacted relationships with friends and others outside of the job



Brady et al. (2019)

Brady et al., (2019)

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NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON FRIENDS/FAMILY

**AVOIDANCE
(45%)**

Decreased trust
Other negative effects

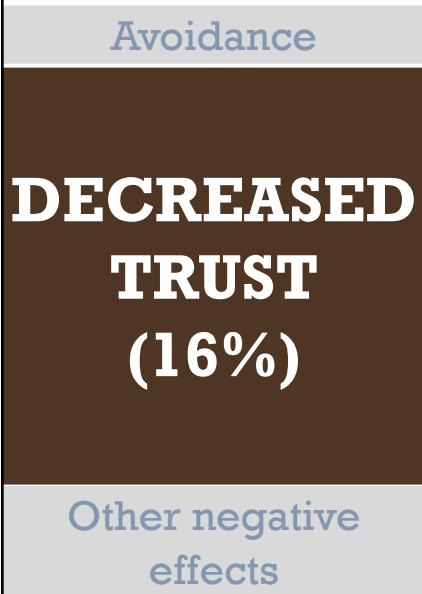
“When friends ask me what I do for a living, it kills the mood we are in so I don’t discuss my work or anything I do with anyone I talk to because I’m afraid I will scare them away, so in a way I feel me distancing myself from others.”

Male investigator, 6-10 years experience

Brady et al., (2019)

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NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON FRIENDS/FAMILY



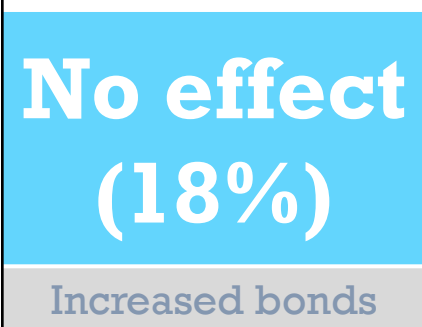
"I find it difficult to engage in conversations that people do in their daily lives...Most people are offended in conversations regarding the latest research on incest or sexual abuse. If I do engage in conversations, I always question the motive. Are they truly interested or are they going to tell me about their 'friend/neighbor'?"

Female investigator, 0-5 years experience

Brady et al., (2019)

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POSITIVE EFFECTS ON FRIENDS/FAMILY



Brady et al., (2019)

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POSITIVE EFFECTS ON FRIENDS/FAMILY

No effect

Increased bonds (16%)

“My work has given me a greater appreciation for my health, my family’s health, and my relationships with friends. This work has brought us a lot closer and has allowed us to share feelings that other friends/families may find to be hard subjects to talk about”

Male investigator, 6-10 years experience; (5) children

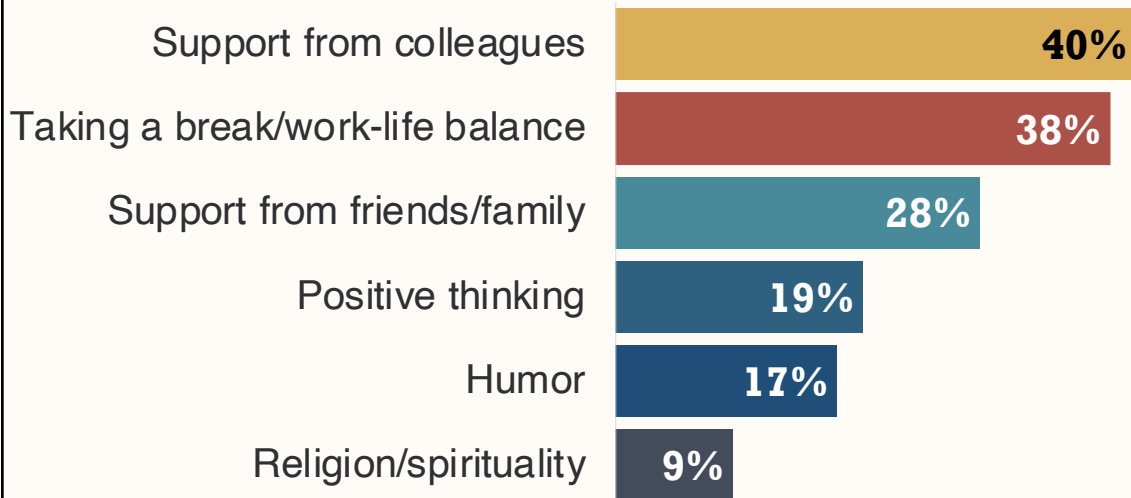
Brady et al., (2019)

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- ~~What vicarious trauma is and how it can render us vulnerable to job-related strains like burnout~~
- ~~How vicarious trauma impacts relationships with friends, family, and children~~
- How investigators cope and what they need from their agency and supervisors**

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What helps you the most in coping with your work?



Responses from 234 child maltreatment investigators

Fansher, Zedaker, & Brady (2020)

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“Being able to have my **family** and husband to talk to about it. Also, **the people I work with**. We are a tight nit group and it has helped to make this job bearable.”

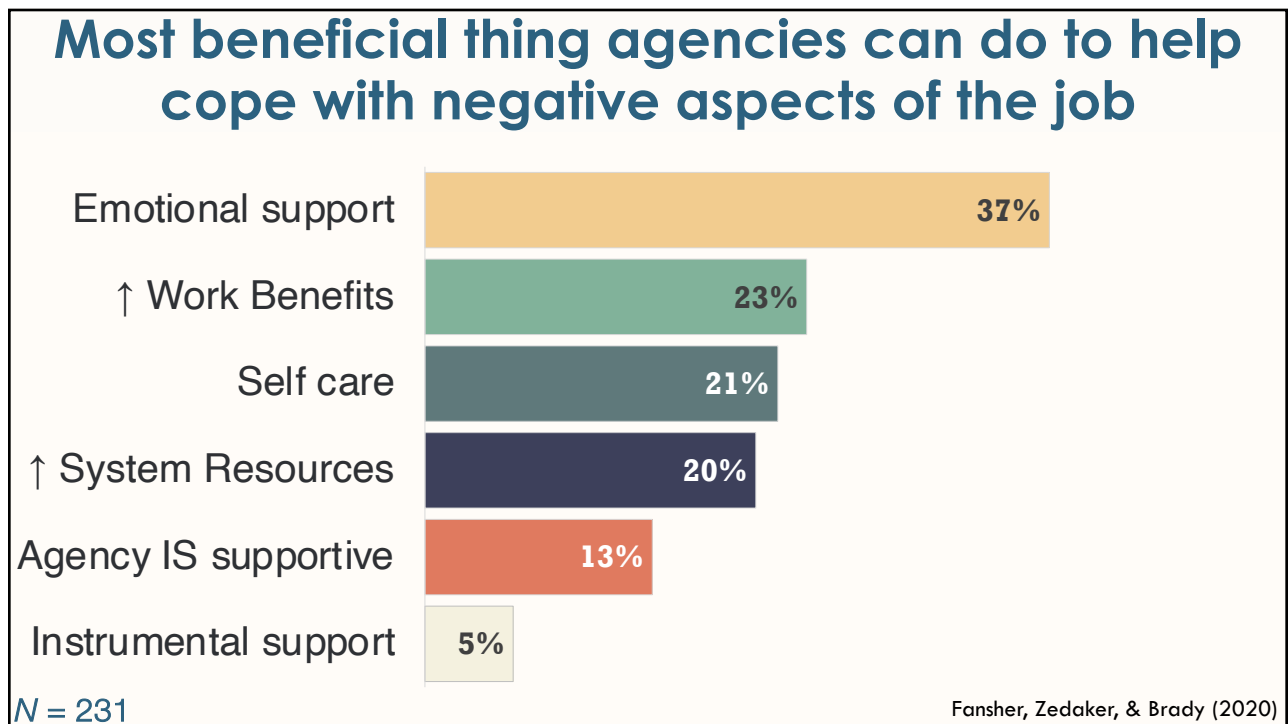


Fansher, Zedaker, & Brady (2020)

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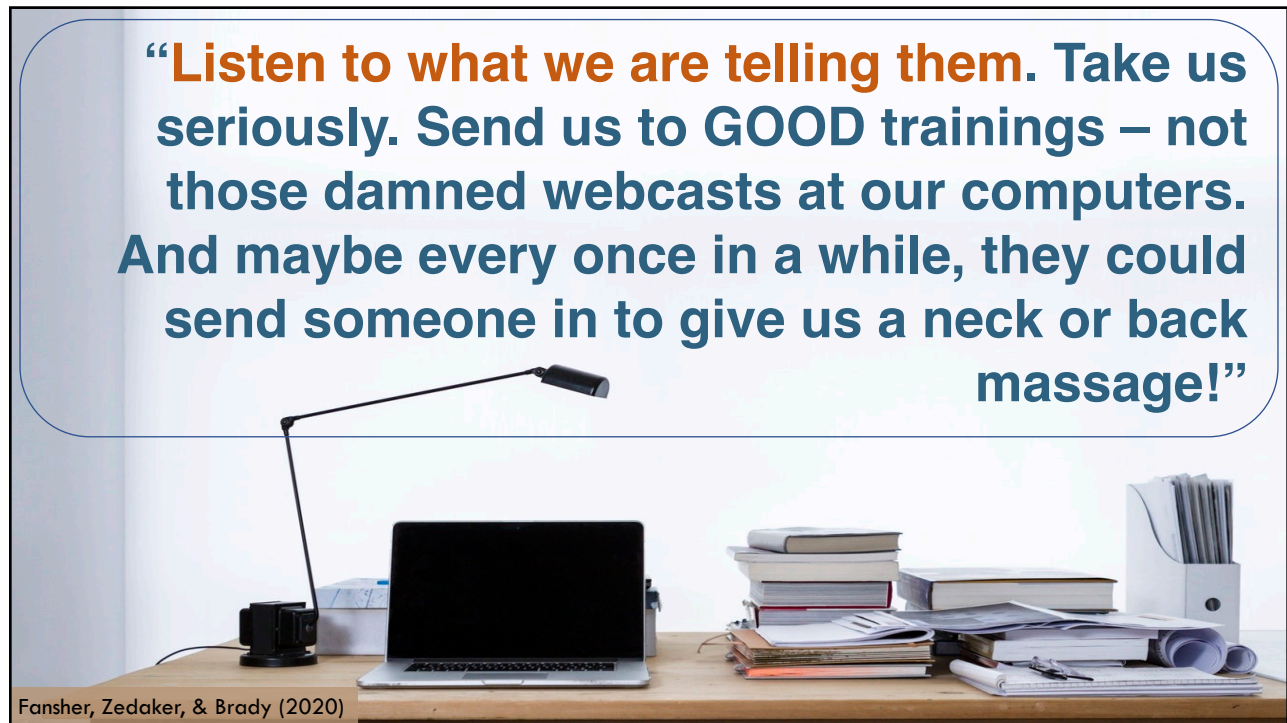


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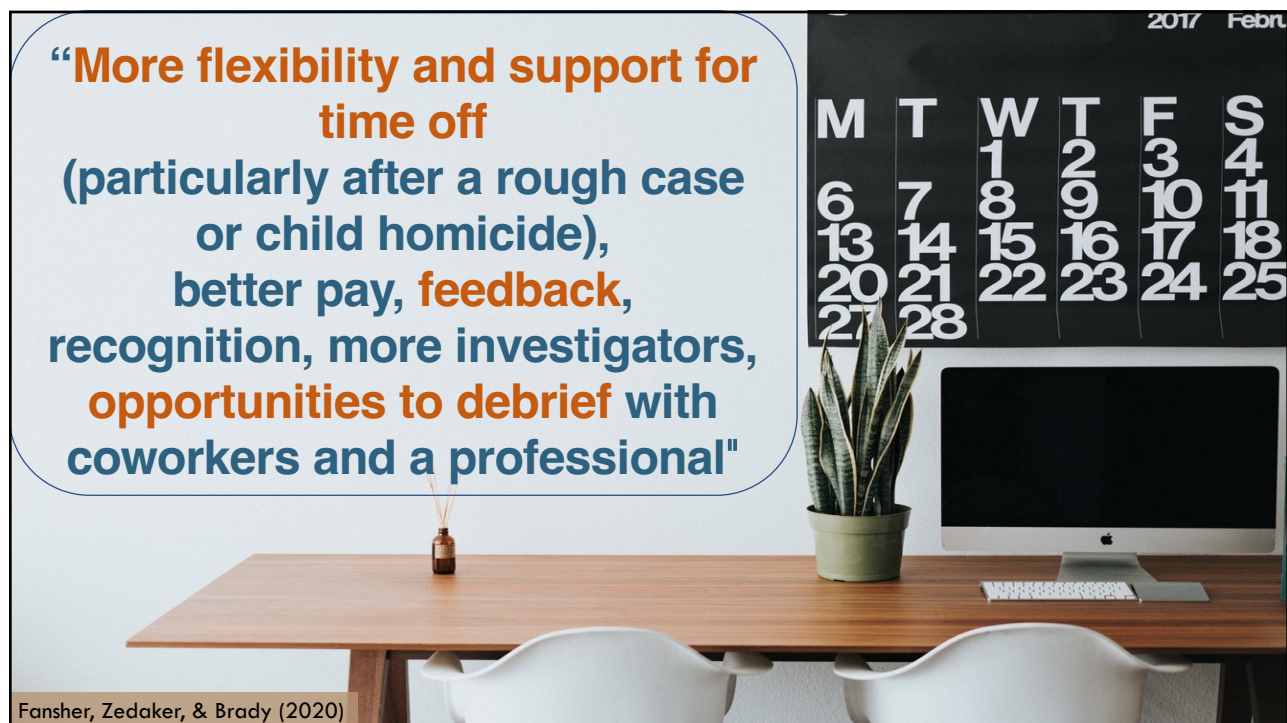
“Listen to what we are telling them. Take us seriously. Send us to GOOD trainings – not those damned webcasts at our computers. And maybe every once in a while, they could send someone in to give us a neck or back massage!”



Fansher, Zedaker, & Brady (2020)

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“More flexibility and support for time off
(particularly after a rough case or child homicide),
better pay, **feedback**,
recognition, more investigators,
opportunities to debrief with
coworkers and a professional”



2017 Febru

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27	28				

Fansher, Zedaker, & Brady (2020)

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“They are doing a phenomenal job! We all work in situations where we hear about trauma and see its affects. We have weekly staff meetings, **engage in fun activities together in and outside of work**, and frequently **laugh** with one another. **I feel as though I am valuable**, and that people appreciate the work that I do.”



Fansher, Zedaker, & Brady (2020)

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ADDRESSING & PREVENTING **EMPATHY-BASED STRESS**

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL SOLUTIONS

Model self-care/stress management

Adopt a health-oriented leadership style

Use resources (EAP programs)

Employ proactive time management skills with family

Mindfulness

Alshahrani et al. (2022); Kim et al. (2022); Kriakous et al. (2021)

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ADDRESSING & PREVENTING **EMPATHY-BASED STRESS**

ORGANIZATIONAL-LEVEL SOLUTIONS

Administrative/command staff support

Awareness/prevention training

Cultural shift to reduce stigmas

**RESEARCHER/
PRACTITIONER
PARTNERSHIPS!**

Early warning & intervention protocols

Employ the right mental health professionals

Train families from **recruitment to retirement**

Alshahrani et al. (2022); Kim et al. (2022); Kriakous et al. (2021)

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ADDRESSING & PREVENTING **EMPATHY-BASED STRESS**

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

OFFICE FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

Vicarious trauma toolkit

Organizational readiness assessments



**SCAN ME FOR
RESOURCES**

SELF ASSESSMENTS

- Professional Quality of Life screener
- Secondary traumatic stress scale
- Burnout

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