Title: Finding Your Way Through: Vicarious Trauma and the Qualitative Researcher

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Vicarious trauma, also known as compassion fatigue or secondary trauma, is more than a topic of study for qualitative researchers. It is a risk we run because we connect deeply with our participants and their stories while conducting qualitative research. The qualitative researchers’ connection to participant stories doesn’t end when the interview is over. We must remain intimately engaged with these stories throughout the data preparation and analysis phases of research, often over a number of years. As we are exposed again and again to the narratives of our participants, even when data is de-identified and aggregated into different themes, we continue to be at risk for developing vicarious trauma.

As qualitative researchers who are both seasoned licensed mental health practitioners and counselor educators, we co-presenters believed this experience inoculated us against vicarious trauma in our roles as researcher. We were wrong. We found ourselves crippled by vicarious trauma while attempting to complete qualitative research projects that accessed unexpectedly deep levels of emotion in our participants and ourselves. We both found our way through this experience of vicarious trauma because our previous experiences with it as mental health professionals. This knowledge allowed us to access the emotional, cognitive and physical self-care
strategies gleaned from our professional training and personal learning, and we were able to cope with the impact of vicarious trauma on ourselves.

We realize that qualitative researchers who do not share our background as mental health professionals may not have this knowledge or experience. Thus, in our presentation, we will first discuss relevant research findings about the experience of vicarious trauma in qualitative researchers, including the aspects of the qualitative research process that create vulnerability to vicarious trauma. Next, we will discuss the indicators of vicarious trauma so that attendees may be proactive in recognizing and coping with these aspects of the qualitative research process that contribute to vicarious trauma. Then, we will present various ways that qualitative researchers may help themselves heal from vicarious trauma.