

Synopsis and Tools for Self-Care

**Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to
Caring for Self While Caring For Others**

By: Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk

The Nuts and Bolts

- Condensed 200+ page insightful guide from a social worker who reflects on years of acquired trauma through work, society, environment, and clients.
- Reviews 16 warning signs of trauma exposure response.
- Five compass signs to help navigate trauma exposure response.
- Easy to read, includes many case studies, and “Try This” self-care tips.

What is Trauma Stewardship?

- Our stewardship involves but is not limited to our intention in choosing the work we do, our philosophy of what it means to help others, the tone our caregiving takes, and our daily decisions about how we live our life.
- Trauma stewardship is not simply an idea. It can be defined as a daily practice through which individuals, organizations, and societies tend to the hardship, pain, or trauma experienced by humans, other living beings, or our planet itself. Those who support trauma stewardship believe that both joy and pain are realities of life, and that suffering can be transformed into meaningful growth and healing when a quality of presence is cultivated and maintained even in the face of great suffering.
- **The most important technique in trauma stewardship is learning to stay fully present in our experience, no matter how difficult.**
- As you begin to observe yourself, be fascinated, intrigued, and in no way critical. Avoid thinking in terms of right or wrong, good or bad, pathological or healthy. As we move away from habitual binary thinking, we can assume an internal posture similar to what a coach might suggest to a runner training for a marathon: chest open, shoulders lowered, jaw relaxed. When we do this, we're more able to go the distance in our self-exploration.

Trauma Exposure Response

Synonymous with:

1. Compassion fatigue or Compassion burnout
2. Secondary traumatic stress disorder
3. Vicarious Traumatization
4. Empathetic Strain
5. Secondary Trauma



Now what?

- **Open the Inquiry:** As we shall see, understanding where you are now may require that you look far back into your past. What events and decisions are most crucial to who you are today? Do you find any consistent themes as you look back over your choices? I encourage you to ask yourself if what you are doing in your life is working for you on all levels of your being. Does it edify you? Do you use it to escape your life? Does it bring you joy? Does it support your ego? Is it a place where you can do something about the pain in the world? Does it distract you?
- **Practice Self-Care:** Even if the answers to questions about your life's direction don't come instantly, there are certain practical steps you can take right away. You can begin by acknowledging that your stresses are genuine and you are looking for healthier ways to deal with them.
- **Be Patient:** Countless colleagues express their despair, frustration, and disbelief that there's not a simple process to follow, a neat package to open, a timed-release pill, that will make all this better. These feelings of urgency and attraction to something quick and easy are, in and of themselves, a part of trauma exposure response. In truth, we know that transformation is a process.
- **The 5 Directions are tools to navigate mindfulness and process your trauma exposure response.**

The *five* Directions

N



water

Creating Space for Inquiry



air

Finding
Balance



E



fire

Choosing
Our Focus

S



earth

Building Compassion and Community

North: Creating Space for Inquiry

- Why am I doing what I'm doing?

Mindfulness begins with being alert to our sensations in the present moment, and it extends to a larger awareness of what we are doing in our lives. Why have we chosen to make the effort toward helping or healing such a prominent part of our lives?

Be honest with yourself about why you are currently engaged in their work. Start with the simplest of questions and see where they lead you. What gets you on the bus in the morning? What keeps you showing up at the community meetings? Perhaps it's because you have an important contribution to bring to your field, or perhaps it's because you don't know where your résumé is on your hard drive. Maybe you desperately need the health insurance, or maybe you're terrified of change. Maybe you're hoping to achieve trauma mastery.

- Checking in with yourself on why you are doing what you're doing = understanding you have a choice.



TRY THIS

- 1.** Before starting your workday, take a moment to literally stop in your tracks and ask yourself, “Why am I doing what I am doing?” After you hear your answer, remind yourself, gently, that you are making a choice to do this work. Take a deep breath; breathe in both the responsibility and the freedom in this acknowledgment.
- 2.** Regularly consult with someone about why you are doing what you are doing. Choose a trustworthy, supportive, wise person. Ask this person to listen attentively and provide you with feedback. It is critical to not be isolated in our work.
- 3.** Regularly write down why you are doing what you’re doing, what your intention is. Keep it somewhere. When you feel yourself going astray, return from that client consult, staff meeting, or board retreat and find your written intention. Remind yourself what it is about for you, and what it is definitely not about.

North: Creating Space for Inquiry

Is Trauma Mastery a Factor for Me?

- Trauma mastery addresses one way of coping with trauma.
- What humans often do to reconcile this lack of control is to **create and re-create situations** as similar to the traumatic incident as possible. We seek to turn a traumatic situation in which we once felt powerless into a new situation where we feel competent and in charge. We tell ourselves that this time there will be a different outcome. Or so we hope.
- Trauma mastery emerges in our lives in three primary places: our activities, our relationships, and our choice of work.

North: Creating Space for Inquiry

Is this working for me?

- At one time in our life, certain actions and choices may help us to survive or serve our well-being. Then, as we evolve as people, we often come to realize that these behaviors—which we thought were essential to us—are no longer in our best interest. It can be incredibly difficult to change, because these patterns may be a part of our identity, and we're likely to have relied on them extensively.
- When you ask yourself this, to **be free of self-judgment** and to try to be honest in your assessment. Remember that the effects of work on our lives may show up in very small or extremely large forms.
- As you try to open yourself to the truth, frame the question in various ways. “Does it work for me? How does it work for me? Why does it work for me?” And once you've answered these questions, more will follow: “Am I doing my work with integrity, given all this? Are my reasons for doing this ethical?”
- It takes courage to admit that our work may no longer be working for us.
- When we gain insight into the why of our work and we find specific parts that do work for us, it can feel like a tremendous gift.

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TRY THIS

- 1.** Brainstorm five ways in which you think what you are doing is working for you.
- 2.** Take three deep breaths and review your list. Assess to what degree those ways are or are not in your best interest or the best interest of those you serve.
- 3.** Create a list of five ways in which you would ideally see your work benefiting you and those you serve. Compare the two lists.

East: Choosing Our Focus

- **Where am I putting my focus?**
- **What is my Plan B?**

Where am I putting my focus?

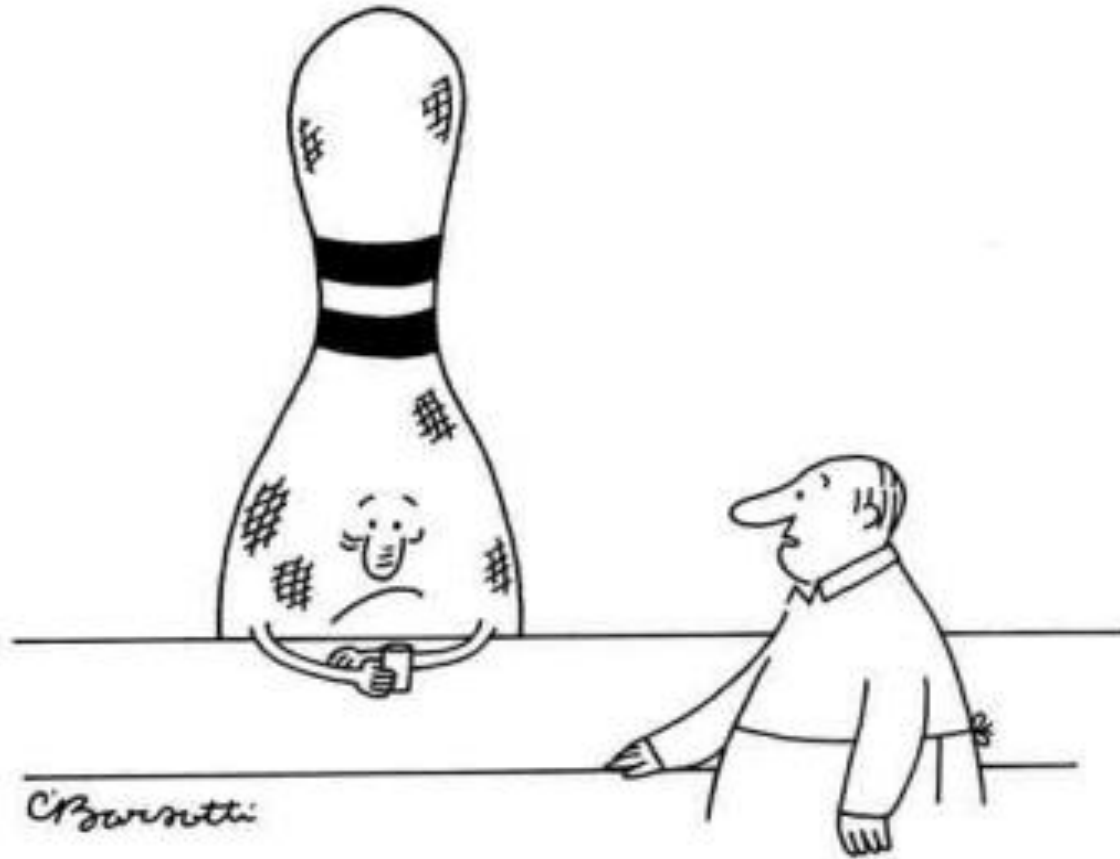
- Being conscious of where we are putting our focus can teach us that we have incredible freedom in how we choose to interact with our lives.
- In the field, reframing may take different forms. Sometimes it means concentrating on what's in front of you, and sometimes it means stepping back. If one client dies, you may need to remember all the others who have lived.



TRY THIS

- 1.** Think of a challenging work situation. Write down three things that make it challenging. Write down three things that you appreciate about it. Look at your lists and ask yourself, “Where am I more likely to focus and why?”
- 2.** For one day, commit to paying attention to the running commentary in your mind. Is your mind in the habit of seeing the glass as half-empty or half-full? Are you able to reframe things as half-full, or do you feel an investment in seeing things as half-empty?
- 3.** Find a mirror, stand in front of it, and look at yourself. Notice the first three things that come to mind. Would you classify them as positive, loving, kind things? If not, try again.

East: What is My Plan B?



"Have you ever considered another line of work?"

Where is my Plan B?

- While it may be difficult to envision a Plan B, it is a practice worth trying.
- We can be so overwhelmed by logistics, minutiae, and the perceived constraints in our lives that we can see our work as a burden, an imposition, something being done to us. Through creating and re-creating a Plan B, we come to understand that it is we who make the fundamental choices about the work we do.
- **While there is great responsibility that comes with this understanding, there is tremendous freedom as well. We always have options to change what we do, where we do it, or how we approach the work at hand.**



TRY THIS

- 1.** Ask yourself, “If I weren’t doing this work, what would I love to do?”
- 2.** Generate a list of five things you can do over the next five weeks to help you get closer to realizing your Plan B.
- 3.** Tell three loved ones about your Plan B and ask them to encourage you in that direction at least once a month.

South: Building Compassion and Community

- Creating a Microculture
- Practicing Compassion for Myself and Others
- What Can I Do for Large-Scale Systemic Change?

Creating a Microculture

- Microculture = community
- Our microculture should support us in two ways: by showering us with encouragement and by holding us accountable. Its members must be people we can debrief with, laugh with, brainstorm with, consult with, cry with, and become better people with. Isolation is an underpinning of oppression, and by consciously staying connected with others, we are taking an important step toward trauma stewardship.



TRY THIS

1. Ask yourself what your ancestors and those who raised you have done, throughout time, to heal themselves and others. When they experienced trauma, how did they go on?

2. Identify the members of your microculture. To what degree do they nurture hopefulness, accountability, and integrity? Think about whether you could use stronger role models in any of these areas.

3. Take some time to examine how your outside surroundings connect with your internal state. Are there shifts you can make in your external reality to achieve a more peaceful and productive internal reality? What is your neighborhood like, how is your home taken care of, what food do you eat, and what role do you choose in creating wellness both locally and globally?

Practicing Compassion for Myself and Others

- Compassion is connected to humility, to recognizing the ways in which we are both powerful and vulnerable, and to understanding how we are interdependent with one another.
- The world does not need more hostility; it does not need more judgment; it does not need more walls between people, species, or nations. And so we can always contribute to the betterment of the world if we initiate compassionate action in the face of wrongdoing.
- Since we know firsthand what it's like to fall down and slowly get back up, we can easily extend our compassion to others who do the same. Compassion provides us the breathing room we need to keep on keeping on. It also allows us to evolve: When we lack compassion, we become significantly stifled in our ability to connect with ourselves, with others, and with our lives.

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TRY THIS

- 1.** Think of someone from early in your life who showed you a great deal of compassion. Hold them in your thoughts for a moment while you allow yourself to remember what it felt like to be in their presence.
- 2.** Recall a time when you were particularly hard on yourself. Ask yourself what your deepest fear was at that time. Close your eyes and replay the situation in your mind, imagining how you could have responded to yourself more compassionately. Notice how this shift in response feels.
- 3.** Generate a list of six people or situations in your life where you think an increase in your compassion could significantly alter the dynamic. Make an intention to approach one of these people/situations with increased compassion each month for six months. Pay attention to the difference in your life.

What Can I Do for Large-Scale Systemic Change?

- We may unknowingly influence systems simply by altering the way we interact with them. We must never underestimate the power of changing ourselves, of committing to being a force for liberation, light, wellness, justice, and right action wherever we go. On one level, this is the only thing we can ever really control—ourselves.
- That said, if we have energy, if we are inspired, and if we feel that we can interact with larger systems while preserving our integrity and a healthy and hopeful sense of self, then we have the choice to support transformation on a larger scale.
- For those who can enter into large-scale reform with their wits about them, how to go about it? Behaviors that are meant to serve others eventually emerge as a natural element of any mindfulness practice. As Connie Burk has said, “Because we are agents who benefit from and are enfranchised to create the political, economic, and material conditions of the actual external world, we are responsible for it. We are responsible for and implicated in and obligated to its transformation.”

West: Finding Balance

- Engaging with our lives outside of work
- Moving energy through
- Gratitude

Engaging With Our Lives Outside of Work

- For many of us committed to the “repair of the world,” it can be a desperate struggle to find a balance between our selves and our work. On one hand, it can be tempting to harden ourselves and disassociate from our work when it gets difficult. On the other, we get buried so deeply in the brutality around us that we forget to take care of ourselves entirely. Either way, it may become increasingly difficult to feel whole again. For this reason, **it is important to create a work environment for yourself that is as humane as possible.**
- It simply doesn't work to check our true selves at the door and hope that we can reconnect at the end of the day. Consider your particular work environment and daily routine. What moments can you reclaim to attend to your inner well-being?

Three minutes between meetings? Part of the drive to a site visit? The five minutes you have when a patient is late? Any one of these may be an opportunity to regroup and center yourself.

- Other Ideas: Negotiate a sane schedule before accepting a job, and renegotiate your current agreement if need be. Surround yourself with colleagues who will support you as you stick to your agreed-upon hours and take time off..

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TRY THIS

- 1.** Identify one thing that you would love to incorporate into your workday but are certain you could not. Now try everything in your power to make that aspiration a reality.
- 2.** Write down all your sick leave time, vacation time, and mental health days. Start planning ahead . . . now!
- 3.** Remember that the labor movement and countless other individuals worked hard to create weekends and breaks and more humane working conditions. Resolve to honor those who have gone before you by agreeing only to a sustainable work schedule and sticking to it.

Moving Energy Through

- Learning how to work with our internal energies is one of the first steps in supporting our body's innate capacity to heal. We can gently explore ways to keep our internal energy flowing. When it is blocked, we can look for activities that unblock it. This will create the foundation we need for long-term wellness.
- For many of us, this concept may require some radical reframing. Letting go may sound like being passive or going limp. The thought of relaxing our grip may fill us with fear.
- We are talking about moving energy not necessarily through stillness per se but through a mindful and disciplined approach of detoxing, cleansing, and putting our burdens down. Some can do this using rapid actions such as running, while others move toward the equation of stillness = awareness = connection = action = life. Those people may practice focused breathing, meditating, walking, gardening, chanting, and so on.
- **Other ways of moving energy through include working out, writing, singing, chanting, dancing, martial arts, walking, and laughing, just as long as these activities are done with mindfulness.**

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TRY THIS

- 1.** Stand or sit in a comfortable position. As you raise your hands above your head, breathe in. As you lower your arms, breathe out. Do this 20 times, slowly.
- 2.** Commit to walking or running or wheeling or biking outside for five minutes during every hour that you're working. During this five minutes, focus on breathing in deeply and breathing out slowly. Notice anything beautiful around you and breathe that in as well.
- 3.** Initiate a co-counseling type of relationship with a colleague or friend whom you can call on regularly. Agree to counsel each other, if only for five minutes. Let your friend start the talking and listen attentively with a calming presence. Then it's your turn. Say whatever is in your heart and mind, moving it out of your system, while your partner in the exercise listens attentively for five minutes. Repeat frequently.

Gratitude

- One of the ways that we can consciously create a sense of balance in our lives is by cultivating our sense of gratitude. Locating something to be thankful for at all times is an essential part of trauma stewardship. It is yet another way that we can reframe our circumstances through mindfulness. Remind yourself that while the suffering may seem endless, so is what we have to be grateful for; it just might be less obvious and take a more creative approach to find it. An example of this is the practice of welcoming the difficult people in our lives as “teachers,”
- Viewing our most challenging relationships as our teachers can help make bleak times bearable. It also roots us in humility and graciousness, which is much better than arrogance and indignation.
- How to show gratitude formally and informally:
Weave gratitude time into staff meetings. After the processing and hashing and debriefing, set aside some moments when staff can honor what is going well, what they are truly grateful for. Many workplaces have shared that they keep morale high by creating systems that allow workers to praise and thank one another. **Such systems could include a bulletin board where people can be anonymously acknowledged, an employee-of-the-week lunch, or simply a culture where people thank each other routinely.**



TRY THIS

- 1.** At both the beginning and end of your workday, take a distinct moment to think of one thing you are grateful for.
- 2.** Every single day, think of one person you are grateful to and tell that person so. You can start with those close to you and slowly branch out to expressing your gratitude for all the “teachers” in your life.
- 3.** Advocate for your workplace to create a forum where you and your colleagues can express gratitude to one another. This could be a facilitated time during staff meetings or it could be a bulletin board where employees can post anonymous thank-you notes. Take the lead in thanking others.

The Fifth Direction: A Daily Part of Centering Ourselves

- The four directions ultimately lead to the fifth. This direction leads us inside to our core, where we center ourselves, and then, gracefully, leads us back out, renewed in a way that allows us to engage with the outside world at our best.
- We are all capable of creating a daily practice to center ourselves. A practice may occupy two minutes or two hours, but the hope is that this is something to which you can commit.

Two Techniques to Help Start Your Practice

- **1. Create an intention for your day**
 - The intention can focus on a mood or an action.
 - e.g., *I will notice one thing to find joy in today. I will go to the gym. I will refrain from gossiping. I will move just a little bit slower today. I will smoke fewer cigarettes today than yesterday.*
- **2. Cultivate moments of mindfulness**
 - Allowing ourselves to hear the bells that can bring us back to this present moment will greatly influence our ability to practice trauma stewardship.
 - e.g., *Setting an hourly alarm on your watch, reminding you to stop and pause for a minute; or making a resolution to hear a mental bell that will remind you to choose your words carefully each time you're about to speak; or dividing up your day into thirds so that the beginning, middle, and end are marked by several minutes of "bell time."*



TRY THIS

- 1.** When your day begins, close your eyes, take several deep breaths, and ask yourself, “What is my intention today?” If you have small children or loud chickens demanding your attention before you are conscious, ask yourself this while feeding your children or gathering the day’s eggs, but create an intention for the day.
- 2.** At the end of your day, before sleep overtakes you, ask yourself, “What can I put down? What am I ready to be done with? What don’t I need to carry with me for another day?” Put it down, and don’t pick it up again the next day.
- 3.** Designate a day of rest. Whether you identify it as Shabbat or the Sabbath or simply a day off, designate a weekly day of non-obligation for yourself. This will serve to remind us that if we are truly to reconnect with ourselves, work and creation must stop. Our day of rest will also remind us that who we are as individuals and as members of society is about our deepest essence and not about what we produce during the week. In addition to your day of rest, allot some time for yourself each day when you don’t obligate yourself to anything, but instead give yourself total freedom to delight in one of your favorite states of being. Be present with this for however long you are able. Notice how you feel when you free yourself from obligation and allow yourself to be centered within.

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Now you know:

- 16 Warning Signs of Trauma Exposure Response
- Five Directions as a Guide For Trauma Stewardship
- “Try This” Tools to Check-in With Yourself

Source

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