THE INSIDE & OUT OF TRAUMA INFORMED IMMIGRATION PRACTICE WITH CHILDREN

KEEPING THE WORK SUSTAINABLE

Copyright 2023. Lara Nochomovitz, JD. Shari Nacson, LISW-S.
SHARI NACSON, LISW–S

Originally trained as a child therapist
Forensic evaluator for asylum seekers since 2018
Expert in child development and trauma, including the Neurosequential Model

LARA NOCHOMOVITZ, JD

Practicing law since 2009 – exclusively immigration law (mainly removal defense) since 2018
Currently a Legal Service Provider with Acacia’s Unaccompanied Children’s Program
Focused a portion of career on supporting victims of sexual violence

Focused a portion of career on supporting victims of sexual violence
THE CONTEXT: WORKING WITH TRAUMATIZED YOUTH

Let’s chat!

What are the sources of stress in your child-focused immigration law practice?
HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

Develops and works in a sequence (bottom-up)
HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

Cortical (prefrontal cortex)

- Emotional Engagement
- Relationships
- Pleasure

Limbic

- Coordination
- Movement

Midbrain

- Heart Rate
- Fight/Flight/Freeze
- Release of Stress Hormones

Brainstem

- Empathy
- Self Control
- Literacy
- Advanced Thinking
- Learning
- Decision Making
LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: WORKING WITH THE TRAUMA OF PEOPLES’ QUESTS FOR ASYLUM

HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM: STEP 1

Once triggered, the brainstem signals for survival-assisting brain chemicals to be released.

- **Oxytocin** (good feelings/love)
- **Adrenaline** (readiness for action)
- **Cortisol** (changes fat/protein into energy to fight/flee)

To enable the brain to focus on responding to a threat, cortisol shuts down brain chemicals that aid healthy neuron development. Thus the lasting harm of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD:
WORKING WITH THE TRAUMA OF PEOPLES' QUESTS FOR ASYLUM

HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM: AFTER STEP 1

There is no Step 2. The system is about survival. When the threat goes away, the system stands down. When the threat persists or repeats, the system is on chronic high-alert, which depletes the organism and curtails brain development and other sensory experiences.

When the threats are psychosocial (and not a saber tooth tiger), we are best able to help ourselves and others by calming the Stress Response System, to decrease all the things that happen when in high alert so the organism (we and our asylum seeking child clients) can use other parts of the brain (intellect, memory, organization skills) to work toward survival.
Remember the way human stress response system works.

When the stress response is triggered, cognition is inaccessible.

The path to cognition is regulation, connection, soothing pleasure.

REGULATE. RELATE. REASON.
KEEPING THE WORK SUSTAINABLE: THE INSIDE & OUT OF TRAUMA INFORMED IMMIGRATION PRACTICE WITH CHILDREN

HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

Heart Rate/Blood Pressure
Body Temperature
Fight/Flight/Freeze
Release of Stress Hormones

Coordination
Motor Regulation
Arousal
Sleep
Appetite/Satiety

Emotional Engagement
Relationships
Pleasure

Empathy
Self Control
Literacy
Advanced Thinking
Learning
Decision Making

Cortex

Limbic

Midbrain (Diencephalon)

Brainstem

Sources: Bruce Perry, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and What Happened to You?*
BRAIN DEVELOPMENT 101

- ACEs
- Blooming & pruning, use-dependent development of neural pathways
- Neurological release of cortisol, oxytocin, norepinephrine, adrenaline, etc. when in fight/flight
- Reduced access to self-regulation, decision-making, and learning
BRAIN FUNCTION IMPACTS ON WORK WITH CLIENTS

- rapport building
- screenings
- linear narratives
- ability to respond to Y/N questions
- testifying in adversarial context
- unjust outcomes
- distress impacts attorney’s executive functioning

Others?
Let’s chat!

How does client trauma impact you personally and in your work?
COPING WITH TRAUMA EXPOSURE: KEY CONCEPTS

Indirect Trauma Impacts

Boundaries & Resilience-Boosting Work Habits

Human Stress Response System
UNDERSTANDING INDIRECT TRAUMA

Exposure (or Secondary) Trauma (STS) is the emotional impact of witnessing another person’s trauma and related suffering.

Vicarious Trauma (VT) is the shift in world view due to the accumulation of secondary trauma exposures and responses, which can interfere with the capacity to continue the work.

Compassion Fatigue (CF) refers to the profound emotional and physical erosion that takes place when helpers are unable to refuel and regenerate.

Burnout is a term that has been used since the early 1980s describe the physical and emotional exhaustion that workers can experience when they have low job satisfaction and feel powerless and overwhelmed at work. However, burnout does not necessarily mean that our view of the world has been damaged, or that we have lost the ability to feel compassion for others. Most importantly, burnout can be fairly easily resolved: changing jobs can provide immediate relief to someone suffering from job-related burnout. This is not the case for CF and VT.
UNDERSTANDING INDIRECT TRAUMA

“At the end of the day, whether you call it STS or VT, what we are referring to is the impact of indirect exposure to difficult, disturbing and/or traumatic images and stories of the suffering of others – humans and sometimes animals and the way that it might impact us as individuals and as professionals.

Over time, repeated exposure to difficult content can have a negative impact on our functioning and overall mental health, and it is important to develop a sense of our individual warning signs and develop tools to mitigate these negative effects.”

Trauma informed legal practice is not clearly defined. It is not a checklist. It is not one-and-done.

The awareness and goal requires a sustainable & continuous commitment and integration into all realms of practice.

We’ve got strategies for you ...
MANAGING EXPOSURE TRAUMA

Resilience-boosting practices to well-manage exposures to the trauma of asylum seeking children so we can sustain the work.

- **Well prepared, unhurried**
  - Thoughtful scheduling
  - Routine brief/debrief communications in place, which can rely upon for Critical Incident Debriefing, too
  - Remember the way human stress response system works
    - when triggered, cognition is inaccessible; path to cognition is regulation and connection

- **Boundaries**
  - Review what my role is and is NOT (rely on your practice’s mission/vision/values)
  - Focus on compassionate presence
  - Respect privacy of asylum seekers
  - Seek partnership, collaboration and assistance

- **Self-care**
  - Organizational and personal culture of life balance
  - Rely on brief/debrief communications for support
  - Allow own enjoyment in life despite clients' suffering
HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

- Heart Rate/Blood Pressure
- Body Temperature
- Fight/Flight/Freeze
- Release of Stress Hormones
- Coordination
- Motor Regulation
- Arousal
- Sleep
- Appetite/Satiety
- Emotional Engagement
- Relationships
- Pleasure
- Empathy
- Self Control
- Literacy
- Advanced Thinking
- Learning
- Decision Making

Sources: Bruce Perry, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* and *What Happened to You?*
LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: WORKING WITH THE TRAUMA OF PEOPLES’ QUESTS FOR ASYLUM

HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM: CALMING THE SYSTEM

We do this by relying upon the brain’s sequential architecture.

STEP 1. Create opportunities to regulate the nervous system.

STEP 2. Create opportunities to experience sensory/motor pleasure.

STEP 3. Create opportunities to connect with safe others.

STEP 4. Then we have access to advanced cognition (decision making, memory, learning, integrating and applying knowledge).

We do this by relying upon the brain’s sequential architecture:

- **Brainstem**: Low-level regulatory functions.
- **Midbrain**: Processes primitive emotions.
- **Limbic**: Processes more complex emotions and memories.
- **Cortical**: Advanced cognitive functions.
LESSONS FROM THE FIELD:
WORKING WITH THE TRAUMA OF PEOPLES’ QUESTS FOR ASYLUM

CALMING THE HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

We do this by relying upon the brain’s sequential architecture.

**STEP 1. Create opportunities to regulate the nervous system.**

**STEP 2. Create opportunities to experience sensory/motor pleasure.**

**STEP 3. Create opportunities to connect with safe others.**

**STEP 4. Then we have access to advanced cognition** (decision making, memory, learning, integrating and applying knowledge).

**Organizational Culture**

**Embed trauma-informed language and values:**
- Develop trauma-informed Mission/Vision/Values statements
- Within on-boarding
- Within client-facing policies/procedures/materials
- Within CLEs
- Within wellness benefits and policies/practices (including staffing, briefing/debriefing routine, brain/trauma aware self-care culture including leave policy)
- Within partnerships & staffing

**Personal Praxis**

- At least quarterly praxis audit (self-reflection)
- Rest = resistance (activist mindset)
- Long-term work-life balance
- Self-regulating: bottom-up brain process
- Wide range of mental health (wellness through to treatment)

**Integrative Immigration Law Practice**

- It’s always both personal and professional
- Mutual aid mindset (sharing resources I have with someone who needs them)
- Destigmatizing and reducing surveillance around mental health
- Ethics around pausing work to ultimately best serve clients
FRONT OF THE HOUSE (OUT-FACING STRATEGIES)

Integrative Immigration Law Practice

- Courtroom
- Meetings with ICE
- Interface with Community Agencies
- Preparing Testimony & Evidence
- Forensic Evaluation & Reasonable Accommodations
- Psycho-education to external settings (via cases, community/professional presentations, journal articles)
- Website, letterhead, logo, business cards
Recommendations for our Field

Creating a baseline expectation that attorneys are trauma-informed — in pre-service education and CLEs

Be more forgiving within the field and the bar

Advocate for changes in policy to reduce external stress
- policies may be at the level of professional licensure, immigration law, what else?

Increase collaboration and decrease competition

Tools/Resources (in Handouts & in the chat)
Self-assessment re trauma exposure through work roles
Links to Bruce Perry videos
Websites/articles about brain development; types of reactions to trauma exposure; ACEs check list
Organizational strategies for working with children who have been through trauma
KEEPING THE WORK SUSTAINABLE:
THE INSIDE & OUT OF TRAUMA INFORMED IMMIGRATION PRACTICE WITH CHILDREN

Q&A
THE INSIDE & OUT OF TRAUMA INFORMED IMMIGRATION PRACTICE WITH CHILDREN

KEEPING THE WORK SUSTAINABLE

Copyright 2023. Lara Nochomovitz, JD. Shari Nacson, LISW-S. Feel free to reach out: Lara@LSNLegal.com and SNacson@yahoo.com
Thank you for attending CILA’s 5th Annual Champions for Immigrant Youth Symposium!

May 18 & 19, 2023

Please complete our survey to provide feedback on the training: [Day 1](#) and [Day 2](#)

Please complete our survey to request CLE credit for attending the training.

Learn more about CILA by visiting our [website](#)!