Caring Safely®

Preventing and Mitigating Emotional Contagion
and Vicarious Trauma

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Sustainable Caring

- The rest of this module will review strategies to reduce or mitigate the potential negative impacts of compassion and empathy, primarily emotional contagion and vicarious trauma.

- This will include strategies that you can use while you are providing compassionate care as well as strategies you can use outside of direct care.

- These strategies can be used when providing compassion as well as when you are around intense emotions or exposed to pain and suffering, such as when you are in support groups, peer supervision, case consultation, live trainings, watch the news, dinner parties.

- Remember that you can catch emotions from other humans anytime, not just when in a caregiving role, so the more awareness you have of what you are feeling with strategies to self-regulate those feelings, the better you will be able to maintain or increase your well.

Practice

Focus on where you feel your breath; stomach or chest.

Focus on which bones are supporting you. What surfaces are supporting you?
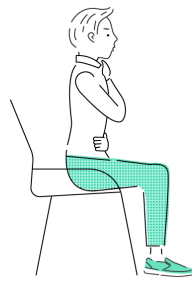
Behavioral Activation Cue

Facial Mimicry

• Have you ever had someone smile at you and you automatically smiled back? Have you ever suddenly noticed your face in an expression that is mirroring someone else or someone's on tv? Facial mimicry is when your facial expression mimics, or reflects, the facial expression of others.

• The expression on your face can actually impact your emotions. If you have a happy expression, it can increase feelings of happiness. If you have a scared expression, it can increase feelings of fear. If you have an sad expression it can increase feelings of sadness.

• Begin to increase awareness of, and control over, your facial mirroring so that you can regulate your facial expression and the impact it has on your body and emotions.

(Rothschild, 2006)

Facial Mimicry

Increase your awareness of, and control over, your own tendency to mimic facial expressions.

Observing and controlling the smiling reflex when not in a caregiving role:

1. On your next trip to the grocery store, see how many people you can catch smiling in response to you smiling at them. As you walk down the aisle and check out, purposely smile and notice how people respond.
2. During an average day or outing, count how often you smile in response to a smile from another person.
3. Then, on several more outings, practice not smiling reflexively in response to some stranger's smile – warning: this may be harder than you think, so don't be discouraged if it takes you several tries to get the hang of it.

Personalize and Integrate With Handout

Facial Mimicry

Observing and controlling the smiling reflex when watching tv/movies:

1. While either watching television, or at the movies, pay attention to your facial expression when an athlete or actor is expressing a strong emotion.
2. Identify which expressions are the most habitual for you to copy.
3. Practice not copying those expressions during subsequent television programs or films.

Then begin to practice when working with someone or in your caregiving role. Use a behavioral activation cue to remind yourself to reflect and manage your facial expression.

Body Awareness Activity

- You want to build awareness of what is happening in your body while you are exposed to intense emotions. The body is a great source of information about what you are feeling.

Reflective questions for building body awareness when alone:
- What is the temperature and humidity on your skin (warm/dry/cool/moist)?
- Scan your body and notice where you are tense. Difference between upper body and lower body or right side and left side?
- How is your breathing? Is it deep or shallow? Smooth or Rigid?
- How does the expression on your face feel? What is the position of your mouth, eyes, forehead?
- Can you feel your heart? Is it beating fast or slow?

Personalize and Integrate with Handout

Body Awareness Activity

Reflective questions for building body awareness around others:

- Begin with clients/patients/people who are fairly easy to work with.
- Place something in your usual line of sight that will remind you to check in.
- Once every 15-20 minutes tune into your body and assess for the temperature of your body, tension, breathing pattern, facial expression and heart rate.
- If you notice an increase in arousal, use a breathing or grounding exercise to keep yourself regulate while focusing on your client/patient. This allows you to be present with your client/patient/person while still keeping your emotions separate from them (conscious empathy).

Personalize and Integrate with Handout

Self-Regulation While Empathizing

- Using behavioral activation cues to trigger a reflection of your face and body, while you're empathizing, will help you recognize when you have caught emotions and when it will be beneficial to regulate your nervous system to prevent emotional contagion.

- Keep your breathing deep and focus on the places your body is being supported, while empathizing, to keep yourself regulated thereby practicing conscious empathy.

- If you sense that someone is going to share graphic details of trauma or pain, shift into this practice before/during your empathy and compassionate care.

Self-Regulation Alone

- When you're interacting with someone, your mind is going to be busy with that interaction and regulating while you interact.

- But, when you're alone and you notice your stress response has been triggered, your mind is much more likely to turn to negative appraisal (thinking patterns and judgements about the past, present and future).

- Your mind may ruminate over things you wish you (someone else) had done something differently or catastrophize your current experience or focus on the negative or assume the worst case scenario about the future.

- When this happens, you're likely to trigger your stress response all over again with your own thoughts.

Strategies for Self-Regulation Alone

- This is when using a sensory grounding strategy to ground your thoughts can be helpful.

- You will now keep the body calm and grounded with deep breathing, and focus on the sensation where your body is being supported. Then you focus your thoughts using one of the following strategies:

  - Pictures on the Wall **(Handout)**
  - 5-4-3-2-1 **(Handout)**

- This allows you to keep the body calm and prevent more stress with negative thinking patterns.

Self-Regulation Anytime

- Now that you can recognize when your stress response has been triggered, both when you're alone and when you're interacting with other people, you are able to regulate your nervous system to prevent emotional contagion and reduce stress.

- This is a skill that will help you build your emotional intelligence and keep your body in a regulated state.

- It can help you reduce your stress and manage your personal and professional experiences as often as you'd like it to.

- Think of all the times your stress, or other emotions, caused you to react in a way that was less than helpful or productive. Learn your warning signs for different states that cause you to be reactive and when you notice them you can shift into emotional regulation or even pause and remove yourself from the situation so you can regulate.