Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue in Attorneys
Appellate Defenders, Inc. MCLE Program - February 23, 2018
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Compassion Fatigue

What is Compassion Fatigue?
Compassion fatigue is the cumulative physical, emotional and psychological effect of exposure to traumatic stories or events when working in a helping capacity, combined with the strain and stress of everyday life. It's important to note that compassion fatigue is different than burnout. While burnout is predictable, building over time and resulting in work dissatisfaction, compassion fatigue has a narrower focus. Someone affected by compassion fatigue may be harmed by the work they do, experiencing intrusive imagery and a change in world-view. Compassion fatigue is also known as vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, second hand shock and secondary stress reaction. Regardless of the term used, compassion fatigue affects those in the helping professions, including the legal profession, and is treatable.

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue
- Perceiving the resources and support available for work as chronically outweighed by the demands
- Having client/work demands regularly encroach on personal time
- Feeling overwhelmed and physically and emotionally exhausted
- Having disturbing images from cases intrude into thoughts and dreams
- Becoming pessimistic, cynical, irritable, and prone to anger
- Viewing the world as inherently dangerous, and becoming increasingly vigilant about personal and family safety
- Becoming emotionally detached and numb in professional and personal life; experiencing increased problems in personal relationships
- Withdrawing socially and becoming emotionally disconnected from others
- Becoming demoralized and questioning one's professional competence and effectiveness
- Secretive self-medication/addiction (alcohol, drugs, work, sex, food, gambling, etc.)
- Becoming less productive and effective professionally
Treatment of Compassion Fatigue

There are ways to mitigate compassion fatigue.

- **Awareness.** Understand what compassion fatigue is and periodically self-assess for it.
- **Debriefing.** Talk regularly with another practitioner who understands and is supportive. This involves talking about the traumatic material, how you think and feel about it, and how you are personally affected by it.
- **Self-care.** Proactively develop a program of self-care that is effective for you. This includes healthy eating, exercising regularly, getting adequate rest, and learning how to turn off the "fight-or-flight response" of your sympathetic nervous system and turn on the "relaxation response" of your parasympathetic nervous system.
- **Balance and Relationships.** Take steps to simplify, do less, ask for help, and stop trying to be all things to all people, including your clients. Start thinking about how you can work on balance rather than the reasons you can’t. Working to develop and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships will also increase your resilience.
- **Professional Assistance.** Treatment from a licensed provider specializing in trauma may be beneficial.
- **Being Intentional.** If you are overwhelmed and struggling with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, or compassion fatigue, put a plan for change in place. Recognize that the attributes that contribute to your professional success (e.g., motivated, perfectionistic, achievement-oriented, driven, fixer) and your work environment may be contributing to an imbalance in your life. Monitor your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Seek assistance to help you implement change and redirect the thoughts that tell you, “I should be able to do this by myself.” Your new mantra can become, “I don’t have to do it all by myself.”

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How Compassion Fatigue Affects Lawyers

Lawyers, like others in the helping professions, are at risk for experiencing compassion fatigue. Lawyers in certain practice areas, such as criminal, family or juvenile law may be especially susceptible to compassion fatigue, as they are regularly exposed to human-induced trauma, and are called on to empathetically listen to victims’ stories, read reports and descriptions of traumatic events, view crime or accident scenes, and view graphic evidence of traumatic victimization. Those with high caseloads and those with a high capacity for empathy are also at risk for experiencing compassion fatigue. Lawyer assistance programs (LAPs) are here to support lawyers, judges, students and other legal professionals who experience compassion fatigue. Contact your state or local LAP.

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How to Help a Colleague Affected by Compassion Fatigue

If you believe a colleague may be experiencing compassion fatigue, encourage him/her to seek help. Contact a LAP for additional support and resources.
Lawyers and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

By Tish Vincent

All the courtrooms in the courthouse were round. During my time as a law clerk in that court, I was involved with cold-case murder trials in four of the courtrooms, one of which had just been remodeled. The jury chairs were deep burgundy, the wood paneling looked rich and serious, and I remember feeling like I was in an episode of Law and Order. The courtrooms varied, but the cold-case murder trials had a haunting similarity. The defendants had committed heinous crimes long ago and thought they had gotten away with it.

I viewed many photos—of victims, weapons, and crime scenes. I listened to victims' family members and to defense arguments. Three months into this internship, I began to have the nightmare. I was in a big room that was dark except for the glow of a ceiling light hanging high above my head. I stood beside a circle of six gurneys, like you'd see in an emergency room. On each gurney was a dead body—injuries obvious and horrifying—draped in a burgundy blanket. I would wake up terrified and unable to go back to sleep, rousing my husband, who would ask about my dream.

"It's that internship!" he'd say. "It's getting to you!"

Vicarious traumatization

Many clients seeking attorneys have experienced significant trauma. Often, the trauma is a factor in the circumstances compelling them to seek legal assistance. As part of providing services, the lawyer will ask for a full account of what transpired. Lawyers are trained to manage their emotions and "stick to the facts," but the facts can be disturbing to hear.

Over time in a busy practice, legal professionals can suffer the same symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by their clients. In the therapy world, we call this vicarious traumatization. It is understood that professionals who work with people needing their help begin to experience the same emotions and even some of the same symptoms as their clients. Judges are particularly susceptible to vicarious traumatization because they are exposed to many more cases than attorneys.

Post-traumatic stress disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder develops when someone experiences a severe trauma that does or can result in serious injury or loss of life. To meet criteria for this diagnosis, the trauma needs to be very serious and engender real fear of harm.

The symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder are:

- Intrusive memories of the trauma
- Distressing dreams
- Flashbacks
- Intense distress
- Marked reactions to cues that symbolize traumatic events
- Persistent avoidance of similar stimuli

Those suffering with this condition have alterations in their arousal level resulting in:

- Angry or irritable outbursts
- Self-destructive behavior
- Hyper-vigilance
- Exaggerated startle response
- Problems with concentration
- Sleep disturbance
- Depersonalization, a therapeutic term describing the feeling of detachment from life and the sense of observing oneself in action
- Derealization, an altered sense of the outside world leading one to perceive things as unreal

Post-traumatic stress disorder can lead to the overuse of unhealthy coping mechanisms, particularly substance abuse. The traumatized or vicariously traumatized individual seeks escape from symptoms causing emotional discomfort. Alcohol and other substances may initially seem like a solution, but the solution is temporary and may well lead to other problems.

If one considers a murder trial in which the prosecutor, defense attorney, and judge view crime scene photos, hear grisly details of the defendant's actions, listen to the defendant and the victim's relatives, it is

Lawyers are trained to manage their emotions and "stick to the facts," but the facts can be disturbing to hear.
not difficult to imagine that some, if not all, of the legal professionals involved may experience vicarious traumatization. They are then pitted against one another in court, and are the focus of expectations and disappointments of many interested parties.

Treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder and vicarious traumatization

Post-traumatic stress disorder and vicarious traumatization respond to therapeutic intervention. When an individual struggling with these conditions makes an appointment with a therapist, there is a sense of relief that someone will listen and strive to understand. A therapist's office can be a safe haven for legal professionals overwhelmed by symptoms.

Healing treatments are cognitive behavioral techniques, eye movement desensitization retraining, and empathic listening. Following evaluation by a mental health professional, an individual may be referred to a personal physician or a psychiatrist for medication if therapy is not progressing.

Conclusion

We live in a time when many educated people are trying to understand the factors contributing to the stress of practicing law. A better understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder and vicarious traumatization contributes to a legal professional's strategies for self-care. Hopefully, this brief article offers insight and guidance for those seeking additional help from a qualified mental health professional.

ENDNOTES


2. See id.; Jaffe, Crooks, Durham-Jackson, & Town, Vicarious trauma in judges: The personal challenge of dispensing justice, 54 Juvenile and Family Court J. 1 (Fall 2003).

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Secondary or Vicarious Trauma Among Judges and Court Personnel

Deborah Wood Smith, Senior Knowledge and Information Services Analyst, National Center for State Courts

Judges and other court staff may be at risk of suffering from secondary or vicarious trauma. There are strategies for building resilience that can help individuals deal with this issue.

The research on secondary or vicarious trauma initially focused on professions such as nurses, emergency responders, therapists, and other helping professionals who were repeatedly exposed to the traumatic events that affected the people they were charged with helping. While some attempts have been made to define and differentiate between the terms compassion fatigue, burnout, secondary trauma, and vicarious trauma, they continue to be used interchangeably.[1] The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM-5) was released in May 2013 and for the first time included vicarious trauma defined as “repeated or extreme exposure to details of the events.” Exposure through pictures or media to someone else’s trauma did not qualify unless it was related to work.[2] This is exactly what happens in a court every day. The repeated exposure to detailed accounts, pictures, and videos of traumatic events that affected someone else is a daily occurrence for judges and other court personnel.

Trial judges, to some degree, are isolated as they must make their rulings individually without the ability to discuss ongoing cases. In addition, legal and judicial training do not typically focus on how one feels. Judges are usually law-trained, and lawyers as a group are known to be at high risk for depression and substance abuse. In 2003, 105 judges working in criminal, family, and juvenile court completed surveys on trauma while attending various judicial conferences. Based on the responses, 63 percent reported symptoms of work-related vicarious trauma.[3] A 2009 study tested law students for anxiety and depression to determine if the individuals who chose law school were already experiencing these symptoms. While new law students were no more anxious or depressed than the general public, at six months a dramatic increase was seen. This elevation of stress symptoms continued during the three years of law school and for at least two years after. While it is not clear what causes this increase in anxiety and depression, it is clear that law-trained individuals are more susceptible to the effects of daily stressors.[4]

People do not typically go to court for happy reasons. They may be involved in criminal cases involving horrific details or civil cases involving evictions, child abuse, or family breakdowns. Judges are expected to address each situation individually, listen impartially to witnesses, and view other evidence. Today, evidence comes in many formats, including grisly photos and videos or frightening emails, voice mails, and text messages. Everyone is taking pictures and videos at crime scenes with dash cameras, body-worn cameras (in the case of law enforcement), and smart phones. This repeated exposure to traumatic details that judges and other court personnel face daily can lead to secondary or vicarious trauma. In addition to providing over cases involving traumatic events, judges in emotionally charged cases may have concerns about safety. Finally, the high caseloads that many judges deal with can add to the stress levels, which in turn makes them more susceptible to vicarious trauma.[5]

The symptoms of vicarious trauma are similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They can include:

- hypervigilance
- hopelessness
- inability to embrace complexity
- inability to listen, avoidance
- anger and cynicism
- sleeplessness
- fear
- chronic exhaustion
- physical ailments
- minimizing
- guilt

Many of these symptoms can interfere with the judicial decision-making process.[6]

Our brains are wired to feel empathy, and our bodies may experience this through sensory neurons known as “mirror neurons.” This was first discovered with physical motions, such as viewing someone drinking a glass of water. The same neurons light up in the person viewing the action as in the person drinking the water. Similarly, when listening to or viewing someone else’s trauma, our bodies can experience their pain through our mirror-neuron system.

We can also use our mirror-neuron system to vicariously carry ourselves. To do this we must develop resilience, and there are ways to do this:

Awareness—First, it is important to know the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma in yourself and in your colleagues. This can be accomplished by providing training to court personnel that identifies the stressors, symptoms, and techniques for preventing or addressing vicarious trauma by building resilience. This type of training can emphasize that developing these types of reactions to trauma is part of being human and not a sign of weakness.

Balance—The second aspect of building resilience is the importance of self-care. Individuals who are exposed to these daily descriptions and pictures of the trauma experienced by others must learn to set boundaries between their work and private lives. To some extent, this can be accomplished by the usual admonitions to get enough sleep, to participate in an exercise program, and to eat a healthy diet. Other important techniques include meditation, yoga, and mindfulness training.

Connection—Because trial judges are typically isolated in dealing with specific cases, it is important to debrief with colleagues who understand the situation. When this is not possible, or is not enough, a therapist can provide this type of connection and support. Individuals facing this kind of vicarious trauma need to be surrounded by a strong system of supportive relationships.

By using these techniques, courts can ensure that judges and other court staff have the resources they need to address the symptoms of vicarious trauma.[7]
Many courts are doing just that by providing training for judges and court staff. Different training models and curriculum are available. Some courts use outside educators to provide training while others develop in-house products. A leading expert in the area of secondary trauma, who has been used in several states for judicial training, is Laura Van Deroot-Lipsky, author of Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009). The American Bar Association has also provided programming for secondary trauma to lawyers, judges, and other court staff. The Professional Quality of Life website at ProQOL.org provides resources for creating individualized training on secondary trauma. These include slides, handouts, screening tools, bibliographies, and other materials that can be customized for training purposes.

Judges and court staff are susceptible to vicarious or secondary trauma due to the combination of working in a busy court, hearing repeated accounts of harrowing or traumatic events, and worrying about safety issues that may arise around volatile or emotionally charged cases. Law-trained individuals have been found to be at high risk for anxiety and depression, and this may be traced back to the law-school environment. Courts can address these issues by providing resilience training based on an awareness of the signs and symptoms, the need for balance and self-care, and the importance of connecting with a strong support system that may include friends, colleagues, family, and professional therapists.


Reports are part of the National Center for State Courts' "Report on Trends in State Courts" and "Future Trends in State Courts" series. Opinions herein are those of the authors, not necessarily of the National Center for State Courts.
A groundbreaking study of Wisconsin State Public Defender attorneys examines the effects of “compassion fatigue” — the cumulative physical, emotional, and psychological effects resulting from continual exposure to others’ traumatic experiences. This article discusses factors contributing to the risk any lawyer may face of experiencing its symptoms, and what can be done to mitigate it.

Ben Conring spends his days representing 10 to 17 year olds who are in trouble with the law. After 15 years in the juvenile unit of the Wisconsin State Public Defender (SPD) Office in Madison, he says the best part of his job is getting to know his young clients well, so he can be an effective advocate for them in court. But gaining that knowledge also has a dark side.

“When you dig into these kids’ stories,” he says, “you realize what sort of life they’re living and the trauma they see every single day. On the one hand, you marvel at their ability to survive. On the other hand, it makes you so sad. You learn about a lot of bad stuff, and you have to try to process that every day. It’s hard. Really hard.”

Judy Schwaemle retired from the Dane
Taking a break from her work as a public defender in Milwaukee, Yvonne Vegas says awareness is the first thing lawyers need to mitigate the effects of clients' trauma in their personal lives. "Lawyers need to know that what they're feeling is real and that it's something they can discuss - that they don't have to feel embarrassed or ashamed for feeling this way. That's a step in the right direction."
Key Study Findings

The study found that SPD attorneys reported significantly higher levels of compassion fatigue than administrative support staff and the general population, when data for the latter were available for comparison. The study’s findings break down by specific symptoms of compassion fatigue as follows.

“A major finding of our study,” Dr. Andrew Levin reports, “is that the extent of caseload and lawyers’ exposure to other people’s trauma were clearly related to symptoms of compassion fatigue.” Interestingly, factors such as years on the job, age, office size, gender, and personal history of trauma made no significant differences in compassion fatigue levels.

**Depression**
Depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, low energy, poor concentration, feelings of guilt or low self-worth
- General population: 10 percent
- SPD administrative support staff: 19.3 percent
- SPD attorneys: 39.5 percent

**Post-traumatic Stress Disorder**
PTSD, triggered by a terrifying event; symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, uncontrollable thoughts
- General population: 7 percent
- SPD support staff: 1 percent
- SPD attorneys: 11 percent

**Functional Impairment**
The extent to which exposure to traumatic material interferes with functioning in work, social/leisure life, and family/home life
- SPD support staff: 27.5 percent
- SPD attorneys: 74.8 percent

**Secondary Traumatic Stress**
The “cost of caring” about another person who has experienced trauma; symptoms are similar to those of PTSD
- SPD support staff: 10.1 percent
- SPD attorneys: 34 percent

**Burnout**
Job-induced physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion combined with doubts about one’s competence and the value of one’s work
- SPD support staff: 8.3 percent
- SPD attorneys: 37.4 percent

**Compassion Satisfaction**
The study also measured “compassion satisfaction,” or the pleasure derived from one’s work. Reports of high levels of satisfaction were as follows:
- SPD support staff: 25.7 percent
- SPD attorneys: 19.3 percent

**What the Numbers Mean**

Are we to conclude from the key findings that SPD attorneys are impaired on the job? Absolutely not, says Dr. Andrew Levin, medical director at the Westchester Jewish Community Center in Hartsdale, N.Y., and co-counselor of the study. Bear in mind, he emphasizes, these results come from self-reporting instruments, which indicate trends, not diagnoses of conditions.

Take, for instance, the depression statistic. “It shows that almost 40 percent of attorneys are over the threshold number on the depression inventory,” Levin explains. “That does not mean they have a clinical diagnosis of depression. All it means is that they have a likelihood for being at risk for depression.”

Likewise, the functional impairment measure doesn’t mean SPD lawyers are failing to function well on the job. “It may mean, for example, that you had a tough day at work,” Levin explains, “and when you got home you weren’t able to pay as much attention to your family as you would have liked, or you were irritable. Your job is interfering with your home life.”

If anything, the data show just how resilient the study participants are, Albert points out. “Despite the fact that they endure ongoing exposure to trauma and have these high caseloads, they continue to meet the requirements of their employment,” she says. “It’s amazing that they do. They are handling the demands of the job, but not easily and not without it having an impact on their lives.”
County District Attorney’s Office last year after 27 years. Many times in her career, she saw horrifying evidence of what one human did to another. Those disturbing images often lingered and intruded into her thoughts away from work. Even now that she’s retired, memories remain.

“To this day,” she says, “when I go past a place where a homicide occurred that I prosecuted, I think about it, every time. I drive past and think, that’s where Sarah was killed.”

Experiences such as these can take a toll on lawyers. Recently, the State Bar of Wisconsin undertook a study to learn just how significant that toll is and what can be done to mitigate it.

The study examined the prevalence of what’s known as “compassion fatigue” – that is, the cumulative physical, emotional, and psychological effects of continual exposure to traumatic stories or events when working in a helping capacity.

On a late fall day, State Public Defender lawyers Ben Gonring and Deb Smith talk about how the nature of their jobs may contribute to compassion fatigue. “When you dig into kids’ stories, you realize what sort of life they’re living and the trauma they see every single day. ... You learn about a lot of bad stuff, and you have to try to process that every day,” says Gonring, who represents juveniles. “It’s hard. Really hard.”

Smith, SPD director of assigned counsel, agrees. “Many of us who have been around for a while know there can be a cost, emotionally and psychologically, to doing this kind of work. Even for lawyers who know how to maintain an appropriate professional demeanor and distance, this stuff seeps in. It changes your perspective on the world.”
In psychological language, exposure to another person's trauma is referred to as secondary trauma. "There's research on the impact of secondary trauma on human beings, but it's never been looked at extensively with lawyers. We're on the forefront of this," says Linda Albert, coordinator of the State Bar's Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) and cofacilitator of the compassion fatigue study.

Research exists on the effects of stress on attorneys, and some researchers have used some of the language related to compassion fatigue. "But no one has studied it systematically," says Dr. Andrew Levin, medical director at the Westchester Jewish Community Center in Hartsdale, N.Y., who facilitated the study with Albert. "So this was an effort to say, 'People have made these observations. They seem to have some validity. Can we establish that more rigorously?'"

Roots of the Study

As WisLAP coordinator, Albert has given presentations about compassion fatigue to many groups of legal professionals in recent years. She's seen the topic hit home again and again with various audiences.

"I've done this with bankruptcy attorneys, guardians ad litem, public defenders, prosecutors, judges, court commissioners. ... Every time it's resonated," she says.

Levin and Albert learned of their mutual interest in the topic of compassion fatigue and decided to do a formal study of its effects on Wisconsin attorneys. They decided to focus on one specific group: state public defenders.

"Compassion fatigue is an important issue," says Deb Smith, director of assigned counsel for the SPD and the agency's point person for the study. "Many of us who have been around for a while know there can be a cost, emotionally and psychologically, to doing this kind of work. We deal with a lot of unpleasantness. Even for lawyers who know how to maintain an appropriate professional demeanor and distance, this stuff seeps in. It changes your perspective on the world."

To learn more about such effects, study questionnaires went out to a total of 474 SPD attorneys and administrative support staff. Response rates for completed surveys were remarkable: 78 percent of attorneys and 65 percent of support staff.

While the study's target group was public defenders, Smith believes it will have value for the profession as a whole. "There's a large community of lawyers who deal with trauma-exposed clients and who need to be aware of compassion fatigue," she says. "These lawyers need to make sure they're taking care of themselves. This isn't just a public defender issue; it's a lawyer issue."

Count judges among those affected by compassion fatigue, as well. Neal Nielsen, an eight-year veteran on the circuit court bench in Vilas County, says judges' exposure to trauma differs from lawyers'. "Attorneys are much more closely related to the facts of the case for a much longer period of time than are judges," he notes.

Still, judges sit on the bench hearing, day in and day out, about a procession of incidents of trauma inflicted or endured by people in their courtrooms. "And I can sit here now and call up in my mind with great accuracy all the autopsy photos I've ever seen," Nielsen says.

In the Trenches

Dana Smetana sees a key message her fellow SPD attorneys ought to take away from the study results: "There's nothing wrong with you. I think sometimes lawyers think they're going crazy," says Smetana of the SPD Eau Claire office, where her duties include trying cases as well as being a regional supervisor. She's been with the SPD for 27 years. "If lawyers are feeling this..."
Compassion Fatigue

To this day, when I go past a place where a homicide occurred that I prosecuted, I think about it, every time. I drive past and think, that's where Sarah was killed.

– Judy Schwaemle, Dane County assistant district attorney, retired

way, it's the symptoms of what's going on with this job. It's nothing negative about you as a person. Awareness of that is a huge factor.”

As a supervisor, she knows young SPD lawyers must learn to put up protective boundaries, to keep their emotions in check. “The older attorneys get good at that,” she observes, “but then when they go home, they have trouble lifting those boundaries” with families and friends.

Not letting the effects of exposure to trauma spill over into one's personal life is one of the most difficult aspects for lawyers, agrees Yvonne Vegas, a 22-year SPD veteran who’s now in the Milwaukee office. “Our clients have a lot of trauma in their lives: poverty, lack of education, homelessness, joblessness, mental health issues, substance abuse issues,” she says. “Their issues become ours. You absorb that on a day-to-day basis, and you take it home with you. It can make you irritable and short-fused with your family.”

Like Smetana, Vegas believes awareness of these dynamics is critical for lawyers exposed to clients' trauma. “Lawyers need to know that what they're feeling is real,” she says, “and that it's something they can discuss – that they don't have to feel embarrassed or ashamed for feeling this way. That's a step in the right direction.”

Some observers, of course, might point out that public defenders and prosecutors know what they're in for when they decide to pursue this type of law practice. True, says former district attorney Schwaemle. “You knew this would be coming,” she says. “But there's knowing, and then there's knowing.”

The effects can cut deeper than some might have imagined. “Take, for instance, prosecuting a sexual assault case. ‘When you prepare for the trial,'” Schwaemle says, “you put yourself in the place of the victim. You have to ask yourself why the victim behaved a certain way because you have to explain that to the jury. You relive the victim’s experience and put yourself in her shoes.”

Robert Kaiser also has seen “inexplicably, indescribably horrible evidence” in his 34 years as a district attorney, the last 24 of those in Dane

Coping with Compassion Fatigue

Exposure to clients’ trauma isn’t going to stop. But you can mitigate the effects this exposure has on you. Here are a few strategies:

- **Debrief.** Talk with another lawyer who understands what you’re going through and can offer support. Debriefing can become a part of the office culture. Remember, this is a discussion about how the case is affecting you as a person, not a rehashing of legal strategies.

- **Take care of yourself.** Eat healthy foods. Exercise regularly. Get enough sleep. Learn relaxation techniques so you can let go of stress and disturbing, repetitive thoughts. Know what truly brings you joy in life and make time for it.

- **Strive for balance and interconnection.** Give up the urge to be all things to all people, including clients. Allow time to connect with friends and family to counterbalance the stresses you feel at work and put everything back in perspective.

- **Come up with a plan.** When compassion fatigue is weighing on you, it can be difficult to get off the treadmill and set a new course. Stop long enough to notice how you’re feeling, reacting, and behaving at work and at home. Develop a plan of action for yourself. What needs to change? Where can you start?

- **Seek help.** If you think compassion fatigue is interfering with your work or personal life, reach out for help. A good place to start is WisLAP. Call the 24-hour helpline, at (800) 543-2625, or coordinator Linda Albert at (800) 444-9404, ext. 6172. All inquiries are confidential.
“We have to acknowledge what people in criminal justice, not just public defenders, go through. We need to recognize how difficult it is to see people in crisis every single day. And we have to be able to talk about it.”

— Kelli Thompson, State Public Defender

The results of the study, the first of its kind, appear in the December issue of the Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease and will draw wider attention to the topic of attorneys’ compassion fatigue. Albert already has spoken about it at a Canadian conference and for the national conference of the American Bar Association’s Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs. In addition, Albert is working with the SPD to develop strategies that both individual attorneys and the agency can use to minimize work-related stress. She anticipates adapting these strategies for use by lawyers in other practice areas.

“I think these findings will be unsettling for the legal profession,” Albert says. “The implications of this study definitely will go well beyond Wisconsin.”

The State Bar is one of several bar associations participating in a second study that seeks information on factors, personal and professional, that contribute to life and career satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The study, to be conducted in May 2012, is headed by Dr. Kennon Sheldon, University of Missouri, Department of Psychology, and Prof. Lawrence Krieger, Florida State University College of Law. “WisLAP will use the data to develop ways to prevent and mitigate professionalism, ethics, and mental health and substance abuse problems within the profession,” Albert says.

There’s research on the impact of secondary trauma on human beings, but it’s never been looked at extensively with lawyers. We’re on the forefront of this.

— Linda Albert, WisLAP coordinator