

Big Feelings

The first time I unexpectedly saw dolphins playing wildly in the sea, I cried. I am no stranger to slowing down and appreciating “the little things,” though I have never considered it a professional skill until recently. In a meeting with a counseling mentor, I expressed concerns about starting my practicum with what I’ve previously considered a weakness: sensitivity.

Some might say I have big feelings. I might stop to appreciate the color of the flowers that I pass as I walk to work, or take a picture of an interesting way the sunlight hits a tree to show my daughter later. I convinced my husband to try to buy a too-large, too-old house because my heart felt warm when I saw the picture in the listing. I have big feelings, and I have been afraid that it would break me as I become a counselor.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

As it turns out, the anxiety I have about starting my career in counseling with my heart on my sleeve is not unfounded. *Secondary traumatic stress* is a concept that was first coined by Figley (1995), who also refers to the phenomenon as *compassion fatigue*.

. These terms encompass the psychological and emotional stress that professionals who serve in a helping capacity might experience due to the nature of caring for those who have gone through or are going through traumatic experiences. The symptoms are similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder, except the exposure to the traumatic event is the indirect re-telling of the traumatic event, as opposed to a direct experience (Figley, 1995; Figley, 2002, Ludick & Figley, 2017).

The stories that counselors hear can linger, inducing emotional distress and physiological symptoms (Ludick & Figley, 2017). [So what do we do to protect ourselves?](#)

Look for the Beauty

As I was in the depth of my fears about being broken by my future career, an incredible practicum opportunity came up for me, and I believe that it came up for a reason. I am drawn to be involved at this site, but at the same time, I am intimidated. I will be observing work with kids who have been abused or traumatized in some way, and I am concerned that my heart will be broken time after time. Upon expressing this concern to my mentor, he said, "Well you just have to make sure you see enough beauty too."

Doesn't that seem simple? But we get busy. We overschedule ourselves. We try too hard to do a specific, intentional, "self-care" technique, but really, sometimes it might be about paying attention to beautiful things that are already around you. Your version of beauty may not be dolphins, flowers, or sunshine. Maybe beauty to you is a slow-simmered Bolognese sauce, acapella voices in the church, or a movie you've watched a thousand times.

When Beauty is Not Enough

I don't want to seem reductive. Some secondary traumatic stress will require counseling. Counselors have an ethical responsibility to remain compassionate and empathetic in their practice. If you find yourself protectively shutting that off with clients, perhaps it is time to seek help from another mental health professional. That will likely happen sometimes, according to counselors wiser than me, and you will be a better helper once you have processed your way through it.

Ludick and Figley (2017) discuss some resilience-building techniques and treatment options that have been used successfully when self-care is not enough to process the burden that the helping professional carries. Sometimes, though, maybe it really is as simple as taking a breath and seeking beauty.

For those of us who have big feelings, becoming a counselor may be the worst career choice, but also the best. We may be vulnerable to heartbreak as we see clients, but we can use our big feelings as motivation as we genuinely empathize with them and help them make meaning of their, sometimes traumatic, experiences. To protect ourselves, we must also make sure to find our version of beauty, and make sure we absorb that just as much as we absorb our

clients' experiences.

I leave you with this, counselors and counselors-in-training: find whatever beauty means for you, whether it is nature, music, or pasta sauce.

References

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Countering Secondary Traumatic Stress with Beauty

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