

THE 16 WARNING SIGNS OF A TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSE

It is perfectly normal to have a response when exposed to trauma work. In fact, our response means we still have the capacity to connect our internal world with the external reality. Whether you identify with one, a few, or many of the warning signs; know that your awareness and curiosity about these can lead to more insight and compassion for yourself, your clients and your work. As you move through the list, pay special attention to how you feel; while honoring the courage it takes to look honestly at yourself and your own behavior.

1) Feeling Helpless / Hopeless

Difficult to see that any progress is being made for positive social or political change. Successes are hard to keep in focus. May believe things are plunging into greater despair. May feel overwhelmed, as if nothing can remedy the situation.

2) A Sense That One Can Never Do Enough

Holds the belief that 'I am not doing enough and I should be doing more'.

3) Hypervigilance

Experiences the feeling of always being 'on', even in times where nothing can be, or should be done. Being wholly focused on the job, to the extent that being present in other areas of life is impossible.

4) Diminished Creativity

Experiences being less innovative and bored with what one is doing. Unable to remember times of more creativity. Experiences a decrease in joy. Craves more structure and less creativity.

5) Inability to Embrace Complexity

Craves clear signs of right and wrong; good and bad – while feeling the urgent need to choose sides. More likely to say 'no', and may be more dogmatic and opinionated. May look to taking a side in a debate no matter what the debate is about.

6) Minimizing

May consider less extreme experiences of trauma as 'less' real and therefore less deserving of time and support. May downplay anything that does not fall into the 'most extreme' category of hardship.

7) Chronic Exhaustion / Physical Ailments

A bone-tired, soul-tired, heart-tired kind of exhaustion – your mind is tired, your body is tired, your spirit is tired and your people are tired. May hold the belief that one has no choice about the work they do.

8) Inability to Listen / Deliberate Avoidance

Avoidance professionally – ‘I leave my voice message box full’. Avoidance personally - going out with people less and less - and when doing so, engages with people who ‘get it’ or who engage superficially.

9) Dissociative Moments

The experience of being engaged in whatever you are doing, and for whatever reason, having something unhang within you. It is losing the last five sentences you have spoken, or not having heard the last part of what someone has shared.

10) Sense of Persecution

May become convinced that others are responsible for our well-being, and that we lack the personal agency to transform our circumstances.

11) Guilt

Unable to find joy in life, largely due to guilt associated with how we live in a world with such disparities in resources, and privilege.

12) Fear

Fear of intense feelings, of personal vulnerability, or of potential victimization.

13) Anger & Cynicism

Can be experienced through a cynical sense of humour, in an effort to cope with anger.

14) Inability to Empathize / Numbing

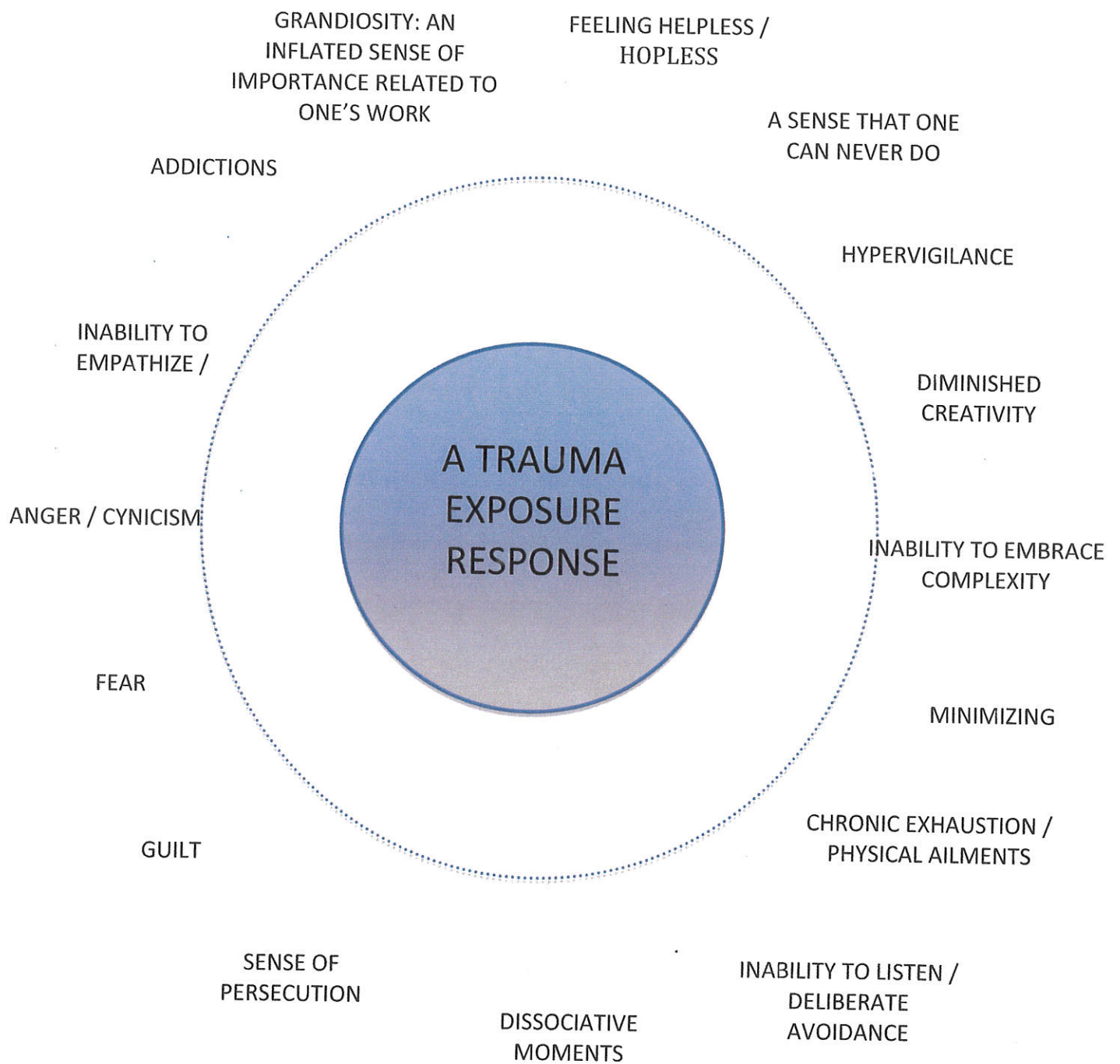
May have numbed out intense feelings, where any hint of experiencing them again, may be scary or distasteful OR leave us feeling out of control.

15) Addictions

People may find themselves using drugs, alcohol, food, sex, work and other distractions to ‘check out’.

16) Grandiosity: An Inflated Sense of Importance Related to One’s Work

When work becomes the centre of our identity. ‘Our work is breathtakingly important... and so are we’.



From; Trauma Stewardship; An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others, by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers (2009).

