

Low Impact Processing

Almost all helpers acknowledge that they have, in the past, knowingly and unknowingly traumatized their colleagues, friends and families with stories that were probably unnecessarily graphic. Using Low Impact Processing can help with this: it involves four key steps: self-awareness, fair warning, consent, and sharing, also called limited disclosure.

1) Increased Self Awareness

Have you ever shocked or horrified friends or family with a work story that you thought was fairly benign or even funny? Working in this field, we rapidly become desensitized to the trauma and loss we are exposed to daily. Try and become more aware of the stories you tell and the level of detail you provide when telling a story. Ask yourself: Were all those details really necessary to the storytelling?

2) Fair Warning

We use fair warning in everyday life: If you had to call your sister and tell her that your grandfather has passed away, you would likely start the phone call with “I have some bad news” or “You better sit down”. This allows the listener to brace themselves to hear the story. Why not do the same when debriefing? If I know that you are coming to tell me a traumatic story, I will be prepared to hear this information and it will be less traumatic for me to hear.

3) Consent

Once you have warned the listener, you need to ask for consent. This can be as simple as saying: “I need to discuss something with you, is this a good time?” or “I heard something really hard today, and I could really use a talk, could I talk to you about it?” The listener then has a chance to decline, or to qualify what they are able/ready to hear.

4) Limited Disclosure

Now that you have received consent from your colleague, you can decide how much to share. I suggest imagining that you are telling the story starting on the outer circle of the story (i.e. the least traumatic information) and slowly move in towards the core (the very traumatic information) at a gradual pace. Preferably you focus on how the experience made you feel not the graphic details.

How much detail is enough? How much is too much?

Don’t assume you need to disclose all the details. Is sharing the graphic details necessary to the discussion? For example, when discussing a child being removed from the home, you may need to say “the child suffered severe neglect and some physical abuse at the hands of his mother” or you may in certain instances need to add a qualifier, “it was brutal and humiliating” for purpose of the clinical discussion. Ask yourself: Is this too much trauma information to share? Low Impact Processing is a simple and easy strategy to protect ourselves, our loved ones and co-workers from unnecessary traumatic details.

This approach is adapted from an article originally posted on www.compassionfatigue.ca.
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