



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Using visual metaphors to respond to stress and trauma

Introduction

Child and family social work is complex and challenging. Social workers come into contact with families who have experienced loss, bereavement, poverty, discrimination and many other kinds of hardship.

In order to engage children and families, social workers are asked to work collaboratively to build strong, supportive, purposeful relationships that ultimately protect children from harm.

However, given that protecting children and young people from harm often results in social workers having to intervene in family life, they may at times (quite understandably) encounter hesitation, caution or hostility from families.

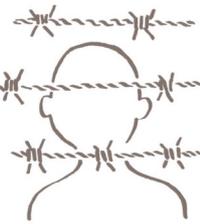
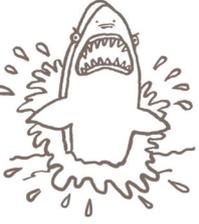
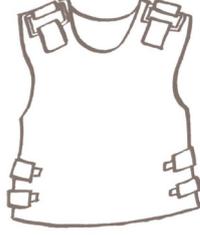
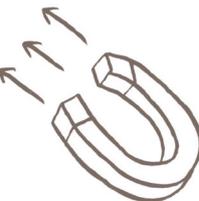
These pressures can be exacerbated if social workers feel unsupported by (or unable to develop within) the organisations they represent, or believe that these organisations do not offer a high-quality service to children and families. That's why we encourage supervisors to find out through discussion what makes life stressful for their supervisees. In this way, both individual and organisational problems can be better identified and addressed.

This learning tool provides you with two illustrated worksheets developed by Dr Karen Treisman, as part of her work on trauma and survival responses. The first one focuses on how individuals respond to stress and trauma. The second highlights how individuals might behave within a stressful organisational context.

Reflective prompt questions accompany each worksheet, which you can use as a springboard for discussion with your supervisees. These questions are designed to find out more about individual experiences of stress, resilience, and strategies for coping, as well as how organisations can better offer support.

Worksheet one: feeling unsafe and putting up defences

When I am feeling "unsafe" and need to protect myself I ...

| | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| <p>Surround myself with barbed wire</p>  | <p>Go into attack mode like a hungry shark</p>  | <p>Go into my own protective bubble</p>  | <p>Put on my bulletproof vest</p>  | <p>Retreat into my tortoise shell</p>  |
| <p>Make myself small/invisible</p>  | <p>Hide away in the fog</p>  | <p>Freeze on the spot</p>  | <p>Whizz around like a dart</p>  | <p>Paint on a smile like a clown</p>  |
| <p>Put up my spikes like a hedgehog</p>  | <p>Zoom away like a speeding car</p>  | <p>Push people away like an opposing magnet</p>  | <p>Think in black and white</p>  | <p>What else?</p>  |

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This illustrated worksheet was developed to help children, young people, parents or carers, and practitioners to express and understand some common responses to (and ways of coping with) feelings like distress, stress, trauma, fear or discomfort. The worksheet is designed to stimulate thought and discussion in a playful, visual way by using metaphors that do not blame, stigmatise or reference jargon and are, therefore, more accessible.

These metaphors are intended to encompass many possibilities. For example, being in 'a protective bubble' might be used to describe a range of responses, including shutting down, blocking things out, numbing, avoiding, dissociating, and so on. 'Whizzing around like a dart' could refer to people who are constantly on the move, always busy, struggle to stay still, have been labelled as having 'ADHD', and so on.

It's important not to label these responses as good or bad. Survival and coping strategies have been developed for a reason. They were needed, have been learned, and are often reinforced through life and relationship experiences. It's therefore important that practitioners honour and respect them. Not least because it's unwise to remove defences until we understand what purpose they serve, and the person who employs them feels safe enough to take them down.

With this in mind, the prompts on the next page provide an opportunity to increase our own and other people's capacity for reflection, understanding, empathy and awareness.

Ways to use the worksheet

The above illustration was developed as a playful, non-stigmatising resource for working directly with children and families. As such, it has been effective.

For example, one young person who used it said, 'I had an argument with my foster carer and the house felt like stormy waters, so I could feel that I was becoming the shark and about to attack, so I've phoned you to think about how to become a dolphin.' And a mother commented, 'I know when I go into court I go into my protective foggy bubble, and then they think I don't care, so I want to think about how I can burst the bubble and actually be there.'

It can also be used in the following ways:

As an educational tool in supervision or team discussions to discuss common survival and coping responses, and to consider the relevance of these concepts in relation to the children and families your teams work with.

To help identify your own (or other people's) responses to stress in order to increase awareness and the capacity for self-reflection. You could do this through discussion, or by highlighting the relevant responses and asking the following questions to further your understanding:

- > When I experienced stress due to being [treated unfairly / dismissed / criticised by others, etc.] I used [relevant response] because...
- > The person I most often use [relevant response] with is... because they make me feel...
- > Perceived differences play a part in that my [white / BAME / gay / straight] colleague uses [relevant response] whereas I tend to use [relevant response].
- > When I was younger I used to cope by [relevant response] but these days I tend to [relevant response].

By expanding on responses through drawing, writing, sculpting and so on. For example, if someone says they tend to go into shark-attack mode, you may want to consider asking some of the following questions while providing creative materials like crayons, modelling clay, or simply a pen and paper:

- > When is / has being shark-attack mode been your friend / needed / helpful?
- > What is your story and relationship to attacking like a shark? Where did you learn how to do it? How did it develop?
- > What makes the shark get angry? What helps the goldfish / dolphin underneath to pay a visit?
- > If the shark could talk, what would it say?
- > Is it sometimes helpful to be a shark? When is it not so helpful?

As a way to think about relationships and dynamics. For example, consider a parent or carer and a child, a social worker and a child, a supervisor and supervisee, or two work colleagues. What happens if one person attacks like a shark and the other goes into their shell like a tortoise? What about two people who tend to go into protective bubbles? Use the following questions to expand and reflect on these scenarios:

- > Which responses conflict with each other?
- > Which complement and mesh well?
- > Which responses tend to push people's buttons?
- > Which reinforce a person's existing coping style and ways of relating to other people?
- > What patterns do my [supervisor / colleague / family] and I fall into? What mirroring or parallel process are we expressing?
- > How might knowing this about ourselves change our way of understanding and communicating with each other?

A better understanding of personal dynamics helps build a culture of empathy, compassion and respect. For example, people who tend to retreat into protective bubbles may be perceived as rude or aloof. Understanding that a person is none of these things, but simply someone who copes with stress in this way, creates further opportunities for openness and discussion.

Similarly, when we appreciate that those who tend to react like angry sharks aren't in fact angry but worried and scared, we are better able to meet them halfway and resolve what's really happening at the root.

This is important because we often mirror dynamics we have experienced elsewhere, either personally or professionally. For example, the behaviour of warring parents within a work situation may be echoed within supervision. Or conflict between siblings in early personal life may play out between colleagues at work.

Consider using the following questions to think about these dynamics:

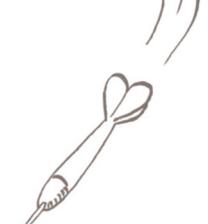
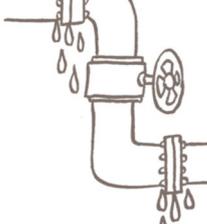
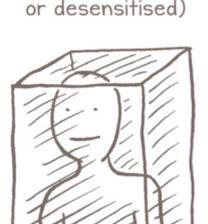
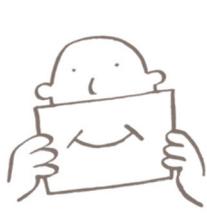
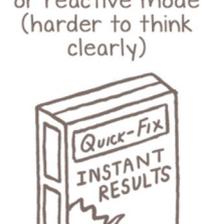
- > Who makes me [freeze / prickle / attack / retreat]? Where does this pattern of behaviour come from?
- > When am I my [best / happiest / worst / most stressed self]?
- > How can I earlier communicate these feelings?

These questions can help you regulate your emotions and make a wellness plan:

- > I know I'm likely to feel spiky when...
- > When my spikes start coming up, I can choose to [verbalise how I'm feeling / take a break etc.]
- > Instead of using spikes I could...
- > People I can speak to are...

Worksheet two: organisational defences

Some responses and coping strategies which we commonly see in traumatised, unhealthy, and at times trauma-induced organisations and systems (Survival mode/ Parallel Processes).

| | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| <p>Go into attack mode like a hungry shark</p>  | <p>Put up my spikes like a hedgehog</p>  | <p>Go into my protective bubble</p>  | <p>Whizz around like a dart</p>  | <p>Spill out like water from a leaky pipe</p>  |
| <p>Put on my bulletproof vest</p>  | <p>A deflated balloon (depressed, low, hopeless)</p>  | <p>A war on the body</p>  | <p>A stretched and snappy elastic band</p>  | <p>Rigid thinking (e.g. black and white, them and us)</p>  |
| <p>Frozen (numb, compartmentalised or desensitised)</p>  | <p>Being hyper-vigilant and on guard</p>  | <p>Paint on a smile like a clown</p>  | <p>Over-intellectualising</p>  | <p>Tornado thoughts</p>  |
| <p>Retreat into my tortoise shell</p>  | <p>Crushed empathy (dehumanising)</p>  | <p>Go into quick fix or reactive mode (harder to think clearly)</p>  | <p>Point the finger (shame and blame)</p>  | <p>What else?</p>  |

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The second illustrated worksheet focuses on organisational defences, and survival and coping responses. You can use it in individual supervision or discussions with your team, to explore how supervisees, groups or organisations respond to trauma.

This worksheet helps supervisors and supervisees to explore the impact of the work they do, as well as the organisational cultures and contexts they work within.

(The information in the table on the next page is adapted from [Dr Treisman's Winston Churchill Fellowship report](#) on adversity, culturally, and trauma-informed, infused and responsive organisations. If you cite any of this content, please be sure to reference the report).

Trauma comes from the Greek work traumata, which means to pierce or wound. It can be helpful to think of trauma in this way because it pierces and wounds organisations, families, individuals and societies, and can leave them feeling soaked or steeped in it.

Just like people, organisations are alive. They're always developing and adapting, and equally vulnerable to stress. Loss, dissociation and toxic stress can spread like contagion throughout an organisation. When that happens, organisations can become traumatised, unhealthy and distressed, which can result in practices that induce (rather than reduce) trauma.

Organisations are also like people in that they have their own histories, stories, roots and influencing events. They also have memories, and their own ghosts and angels of the past (Fraiberg, 1975 and Lieberman et al, 2005, respectively). These may be conscious or unconscious, embedded in the culture, and are often felt bubbling beneath the surface, particularly when left unresolved.

In order to protect themselves from painful feelings, organisations often respond to trauma in the same way as people, by operating in survival mode - as described by the images on the above worksheet.

When this happens, all that unacknowledged pain, stress, anxiety and dissociation gets passed down and pushed deeper into the fabric of the organisation. In such cases, you may find that people, teams, or the culture of the organisation itself, can become:

- > reactive or crisis-driven
- > avoidant, numb, detached or dissociated (either emotionally or from the organisational mission, or both)
- > black and white (them vs us / good vs bad etc.)
- > unreflective or lacking in trust
- > too busy to think or feel
- > defensive
- > on edge and hyper-vigilant
- > physically and emotionally unwell
- > confused, lost, alone and disoriented
- > dysregulated
- > chaotic
- > frozen and frustrated
- > rigid and inflexible (which includes striving for perfectionism)
- > mournful and grief-stricken
- > helpless and depressed
- > disconnected, disintegrated, incoherent and fragmented.

On top of organisational trauma, many practitioners carry their own adversity and stress, which can compound existing factors: *'The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it, is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water and expecting not to get wet'* (Remen, 1994).

That's why we need to name, acknowledge, and explore the impact of phenomena like secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout, as well as being curious about wider team and organisational dynamics. This is fundamental to our own and other people's wellbeing.

The wellbeing of supervisors and supervisees is not only essential for the work itself, but has a ripple effect on decision-making, relationship-based practice, staff satisfaction, sickness, and so on.

There are lots of ways you can use worksheet two to think further about some of these themes. In conjunction with worksheet one, for example, or in the following ways (these sheets are in no way prescriptive so feel free to be as creative as you wish):

As an educational tool in supervision or team discussions.

To identify common patterns of behaviour.

To investigate tricky or complex work dynamics, within teams or between people / services.

To name or highlight the way organisational culture impacts on you or others, for example:

- > Is the team / organisation soaked in stress or trauma?
- > How does this manifest itself and what can be done about it?

As a way to mirror any familiar behaviour or processes (like dynamics within a family which may also play out within a team / supervision relationship, or between services).

As a way to explore important questions like:

- > Are we reacting instead of reflecting?
- > Are we in survival instead of thinking mode?
- > Are we modelling the model?
- > Are we teaching people what (and how) we want to teach them?
- > How can we work towards feeling it without becoming it?
- > How can we regulate others if we are dysregulated?
- > How can we support others in emotional quicksand if we, too, are in emotional quicksand?

To explore the capacity for our own self-care, reflection and wellbeing.

To consider the hazards of not looking after ourselves properly.

To explore what supports us to be our best selves, and what contributes to us being our worst or most stressed selves.

To instigate discussions around things like our triggers and needs, secondary and vicarious trauma, and burnout.

To think about how we respond and communicate when we are stressed, and what impact this can have on all the layers of our work and wellbeing.

To emphasise the importance of our own wellbeing, and support us to be proactive in creating wellbeing plans.

Other ways you can use this tool

Both illustrated worksheets can be used with children and families or in one-to-one or group supervision discussions.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

Treisman K (2019) *Becoming a more culturally, adversity, and trauma-informed, infused and responsive organisation*. London: Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. Available online: www.wcmt.org.uk/fellows/reports/becoming-more-culturally-adversity-and-trauma-informed-infused-and-responsive

Author

Dr Treisman is a clinical psychologist, trainer and author who has worked extensively with children and families. As the director of *Safe Hands and Thinking Minds*, she focuses on how organisations can better support their staff, and continues to develop a knowledge base of those that are responsive and trauma-informed.

Visit [her website](#) for more free resources and details about her books and sets of cards.

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