

Attachment, Substance Abuse, & Vicarious Trauma

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Abstract

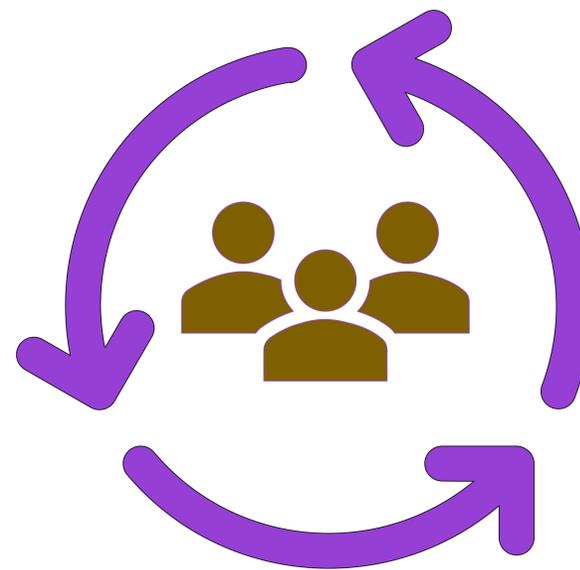
Many studies have evaluated the role of attachment as it relates to substance abuse, mental health, trauma, and psychosocial functioning. An area of emerging research has been vicarious trauma, which is the prolonged engagement in another individual's traumatic material. Research on this topic has focused on those in the helping professions rather than the general population. The present study examines research on family systems, attachment, substance abuse, and vicarious trauma. Upon completing a thorough evaluation of research, there is a noticeable lack in research seeking to understand the role of attachment in the relationship between substance abuse exposure and vicarious trauma, especially as it pertains to the family system. As such, this project seeks to initiate a pathway to evaluating the family system's experience of vicarious trauma stemming from substance abuse exposure, in light of attachment.

Family System

- Family Systems Theory maintains there can be no accurate understanding of an individual without understanding their family (system) and the role the individual play in their system (Bowen, 1966)
- Key Concept of FST is the individual's differentiation of self, which is their ability to operate independently while maintaining balance and connection within his or her family system (Bowen, 1978).
- The individual's ability to differentiate themselves from the substance abuse of another family member may play a significant role in the conceptualization of vicarious trauma.

Attachment

- Attachment has been defined as the ability to create enduring psychological connection to another individual/s.
- Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1969) believes one's internal working model is influenced by interpersonal interactions, self-value, and competency.
- Attachment and Addiction: Schindler (2019) describes substance abuse as the individuals attempt to self medicate due to limited attachment strategies.
- Attachment and Trauma: Trauma has been conceptualized as an immense feeling of loneliness during times of overwhelming stress.
 - Attachment Trauma is the cumulative experience of negative attachments due to engagement in maladaptive relationships, which support their insecure attachment.
- Findings indicate subjection to traumatic experiences increases the individual's potential for engaging in a maladaptive relationship with substance abuse and persistence of this relationship over the lifespan.



*Substance abuse does not just affect **one** person.
Interventions do not involve **one** provider.
So why do treatment outcomes focus on **one** person?*

Why is this needed?

- The system's members, regardless of substance abuser's history, develop attachment styles over time. The functionality of the family system, as shown by Hudson et al. (2002) and Shamsaei et al. (2019), may be influenced by interactions with the substance abuser and their traumatic material imposed on the system.
- Impaired functionality of the system may affect the development of each member's attachment style differently as the process of circular causality continues influence the system. This impairment may be significantly higher if the substance abuser is in a caregiving role.
- Research on vicarious trauma has been overwhelmingly focused on individuals in the helping professions rather than family systems.
- The lack of focus on the influence of substance abuse exposure on family systems was noted by multiple researchers (Hudson et al., 2002; Shamsaei et al., 2019).
- Despite observations and recommendations, a number of questions regarding this phenomenon remain unaddressed in research.
- Shamsaei et al. (2019) maintain systems require increased attention in treatment protocols when faced with exposure to substance abuse including mental health evaluations and intervention to assess each system member's psychological needs.

Vicarious Trauma

- Definition: Mental health state resulting from prolonged exposure to another individual's traumatic material.
- Experience of vicarious trauma may result in:
 - Symptoms comparable to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) such as distressing emotions, psychological arousal, functional impairment, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance response tactics (Hazen et al., 2020; Huggard et al., 2017).
 - Alterations in the individual's core belief systems and internal working model
- Damaged attachments with the family system may predispose individuals to substance abuse and for the individual/family member to perceive events as traumatic.

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In short, this project is a conceptual piece which will be used to launch research into the holistic experience of vicarious trauma within family systems. It is the researchers goal to evaluate and provide evidentiary support for the creation, adaptation, and implementation of therapeutic interventions to directly support the family member.