

## March 2024 APS TARC Podcast Transcript

# Trauma on the Job: Surviving Exposure in APS

## Introduction

**Andrew Capehart:** Welcome to the Adult Protective Services Technical Assistance Resource Center podcast. We come to you with the goal of sharing promising practices and innovations from the APS field, and to highlight what is achievable with new ideas and partnerships to help you envision what may be replicated in your program. Let's join our host, Jennifer Spoeri APS TARC subject matter expert and guests in conversation.

## Discussion

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Welcome to the APS TARC podcast. Today, we're going to be speaking with Taryn Hughes, a Compassion Fatigue Therapist who trains Human Services Professionals to protect themselves from the secondhand smoke of trauma on the job. Taryn Hughes is the CEO and Founder of Forest Hughes and Associates. She specializes in compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma prevention, mitigation, and recovery services. Taryn, welcome.

**Taryn Hughes:** Jen, thank you so much for having me. It's such a pleasure to speak to you, and to your audience. I'm really looking forward to connecting with all the professionals listening.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Great, so, before we dig into the topic of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, you know, a light subject, can you let our audience know how you came to work in this area?

**Taryn Hughes:** Sure, I get asked this question a lot, and I think like many people, the answer is unfortunately, unfortunately, firsthand experience. It was a problem that I needed to solve for myself. Prior to getting into this work, I had worked on Somatic-Based Trauma Support and Programming specifically with young people. And at the point that vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue really hit me hard was when I was working in the prison system in LA. And I just got to the point where it was, it almost felt like getting hit by a Mack truck where just the energy, the exhaustion was so heavy and so palpable, but I couldn't really make sense of it at that point.

I knew I needed to take a break. And so, my brilliant idea was to limit my trauma exposure, but I did that by going back to law school. So, I went for a degree in Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, I went to study in Germany. And what I didn't realize is that secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma also can be triggered through reading accounts of traumatic stress or trauma. So, what that meant was when I was writing my papers on genocide and discrimination, et cetera, that just reading and researching the literature led me to be incredibly triggered because I had, already at that point, a lot of a lot of trauma exposure. And of course, like almost everybody else, a history of trauma as well.

So, long story short, after residing in Germany for some years, I came back to New York City, and I was working on a pilot initiative through the Department of Education across different schools in New York City. And one of the things that was really pronounced to me because of my own journey, was that a lot of the teachers and educators were suffering from secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue, and at the same time, some of the, the changes in education were requiring them to do more social emotional learning, provide additional support services to young people, learn more about their stories in their personal life. So, the teachers were having increased exposure to details and, and situations and circumstances in their young scholars' lives that they hadn't before.

And I was just seeing that this was impacting them, but they, unlike if they were a Psychologist or a Social Worker, they didn't have any supervision, any psychological supervision to help them cope with this. So, that's when I decided this was a need that I wanted to respond to and I started asking a few teachers and when I said, have you ever heard of compassion fatigue? Some of them just started crying and they said, I've never heard the word, but that's exactly what I feel. And when can you help me? So, that really began the journey and I began testing. Testing how to run essentially a group symptom reduction program among staff, among colleagues, because you want to, of course, have the therapeutic touch and connection while still maintaining professional boundaries.

So, it did go through a number of iterations and forms, and then I finally launched the programs and began rolling them out to Government Agencies end of 2017 and 2018.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** And now you're talking to APS Professionals, it's perfect. Those who work in, or are familiar with APS, know how unique the situations are that APS Professionals experience. They see, they hear, they smell every day. They certainly see living situations that are outside of the normal human experience. So, tell us more about that normal human experience. I'm doing air quotes. You can't see it on the podcast, but.

**Taryn Hughes:** Yes, it is such a strange phenomenon. And I've seen this across sectors because after 2018, I've gone on obviously to work with APS Professionals, work with District Attorney's Office, work with Investigators, Anti-Trafficking Professionals, et cetera, et cetera. So, I've really worked across sectors and that's given a unique perspective to see that this strange, shared phenomenon. Is shared across sectors that have a high level of trauma exposure, and one of the aspects is we begin to normalize what's not normal for the rest of the population, and it's almost as if we live in a parallel reality. So, sometimes that's really great because we're getting to new meaningful work, and sometimes it's not so great because we can become isolated and feel disconnected or different than our friends and family around us.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** It's interesting because you say normalize it. I always used to say, you know, 20 years ago at APS that the bar would be going up as the years went by because it took more to impress you, for lack of a better word. So, that was normalizing it essentially. Yes, exactly. Wow, so, let's dive into how this daily trauma exposure changes us. As our people, as a person.

**Taryn Hughes:** Yes, it's so interesting. I think one of the things that everybody can relate to is that first of all, it changes our humor. Again, Jen, you've worked in this field for a number of years. So, I'm guessing you can think of maybe an example or two about inside APS humor that people on the outside wouldn't understand if they overheard it. And, again, we have this alter reality that we're living in. So, tell me a little bit about what that looks like in APS.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Absolutely. After a phone call, when you're on the phone for 45 minutes and you put down the phone and say, oh gosh, that crazy daughter, no wonder the client drinks, you know? Outside of that, there's the situations where a person could go out, an APS Professional, and somebody says, well, the perpetrator was shot last night next door, so, there's no worries in this case. You know, you past professionals saying, well, problem solved, close that case. And it's like, oh my God, there's a loss of life here, but it's just the way they're dealing with it, I suppose.

**Taryn Hughes:** Exactly, what you said is right on point. It's their way of dealing with it and their way of coping or discharging this tension. And I think that's really important to understand because when someone's on the outside of a specific profession, they might have judgment about some of that humor and think, oh, you know that Case Worker how horrible, etc., etc., but the reality is that what professionals, helping professionals across the board here see and feel every day is so intense and there's no way that you can not have some sort of outlet, or response to what you're seeing, hearing, and feeling. Obviously, humor can be really healthy and sometimes other people might not understand it, but in moderation, it's okay.

You know, that can be fun, but I think sometimes we need to check ourselves when we see that, that is our default coping mechanism and that it's turning into a more pessimistic view or feeling that it's taking our power away as if we can't change it. So, we're just gonna, repeatedly have these quote unquote jokes about it. Um, then I would definitely suggest taking a look at your trauma exposure and reaching out for some support if you're feeling that way.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Yeah, that's a really good point. Cause I know somebody I used to work with used to say, we should do a standup routine about these cases. And I was like, outside of us, I don't think other people would think it's funny, you know, it's just that's the way they dealt with it. So, you're bringing up some very, very true points there. So, what are some other ways this work changes us, Taryn?

**Taryn Hughes:** There's so many, but I'm thinking about what might be the most interesting to talk about is, there's this way that we become closed off to new ideas or change. And the reason why this is important to understand is that if you're a Professional, or a Supervisor, or a Leader, it's really easy to look at your colleague and to think that they're being difficult, stubborn, unwilling, or obstinate. But, if we look through the lens of trauma exposure, what might be happening is they might just be trying to quote unquote survive. And what I mean by that is that essentially their psyche or physiology has deemed other things more important to their survival. So, new ideas, which can inherently be unknown have less boundaries, parameters, be less clear.

Those things can be shut out and deprioritized. And when we're in a constant state of being exposed to traumatic stress, we know, obviously, through trauma informed practices, that the sense of predictability, knowing what's coming next. Having a choice to opt in or opt out, having even a small choice about what to do, and how to do it. All of these things factor into, instead of someone being difficult or stubborn, they just might be trying to quote unquote survive and get through the day, and they don't have the capacity to take on new information, or options, or programs, do you think that your audience will be able to relate? Does that land?

**Jennifer Spoeri:** 100 percent. I'm sitting here thinking, you know, that control because APS Professionals have no control. You go in every day, and you don't know what case you're going to get given any given day, any given hour. So, yeah, surprises happen all the time. And, I think the mental health arena as a whole is finally getting some more attention, you know, and those and helping professions are no longer seen as weak or unable to do the job when they need some additional support. Like, we were talking about earlier, I feel like it should be a part of the curriculum or the training for these APS Professionals part of the week work day work week, you know, to address and respond in a healthy way to what they're experiencing and seeing. So, yeah, absolutely.

**Taryn Hughes:** Great. And I think also from a Leadership or Supervisor's position too, understanding that their staff's responses, or receptivity, or capacity to changes that they may want to implement. It could take longer or need to be broken down into smaller segments to be rolled out. And that's not reflective of the staff's lack of intellectual capacity or willingness. It can just be that, like you said, every call is a surprise. Every call is something new. So, when your day is all responding to what's coming at you, sometimes, the back end, there needs to be more predictability and stability.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Yeah, and even ownership. Let them help and have that control over policies, procedures, input, you know, things like that.

**Taryn Hughes:** So, one, one other symptom that I wanted to highlight is what happens when the traumatic stress exposure begins to compound over years. And thinking about my deep concern for professional's, health and wellbeing, when it gets to the point where a professional starts to lose hope. In this part, it really saddens me, one, because I've been there, so I know that feeling of when the world starts to look differently. We talk about the compounded exposure and when it starts to transition into vicarious trauma, when we see the world differently. What we thought or believe to be true no longer feels true. So, sometimes this might come through in a person where they feel like there's no sense of justice, that all of their hard work is not creating any of the change that they want to see, that there's a surrender to feel that no matter what they do, nothing changes.

It's a really hard place to be in. And, it's also understandable considering what professionals see day in and day out. So, if this is you, there's a few things that I want you to really listen to and remember right now, and that is that you never get to see the whole story. It's really important to understand that you don't get to see a

person's whole life story. So, you're called upon and present for the moments of greatest suffering and greatest crisis in their life. And you do this for hundreds, if not thousands of people in a row. over years. So, what happens is that your brain starts to connect the dots and put together a narrative based on the hundreds or thousands of cases that suffering is constant.

It never changes and never gets better. But here's the good news, the people that you've helped, they have lives that either have been different or have been changed from your help, so they've lived a long life before they've gotten to you. They've likely maybe had relationships, or children, or careers, or something in their life that has brought them some joy and satisfaction and beautiful moments in their life. And yes, they're also having a crisis when they meet you. They're also suffering, but we don't know what their life is going to be like after they meet you. Or if it is unfortunately, at the end of their life, remember the decades that they had of maybe a more quote unquote normal life before they met you.

So, if we could see that each client has a complete and full story with many moments where crisis is just a tiny sprinkling proportionately in time, that can help us have some hope that life is not just about suffering. It's not just about trauma. There's a lot of beautiful other aspects of life. And we'll tie this in to how we can work with you to change this for yourself so that you can start seeing things differently. I think we're going to cover that in a bit.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Absolutely. That's a really excellent point there. And I think our listeners can relate to the feeling there's no justice. There's all their hard work is for nothing, you know, and you hear that. But sometimes I always say, we are upholding the client's right to self-determination when they say, no, go away. So, you have to kind of flip the switch and look on the positive side, even though they're still living in a circumstance, you're upholding their autonomy and self-determination. So, it's important to highlight the foundation of APS work here, and that sometimes doing nothing. It's exactly what the client wants. Yes, you know, the cases that come back in 5, 6 times, and on that 7th time they say I've had it, enough, you know, I want to do something. So, each visit is a step towards that change. So, very good points.

So, let's shift gears here on a positive note. The takeaway is that this is a normal human response. And that will impact the majority of APS Professionals. This is fantastic news. Tell us more about this. I like positive stuff.

**Taryn Hughes:** Well, I think it is helpful to understand that it is a normal human response so that, you know, of course you can see the list of symptoms, anybody who can Google, what are the symptoms of compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma? I tend to steer people in a slightly different direction because it is normal. If you're, if you're witnessing the things that you're witnessing, it would be almost abnormal not to have a response to that. So, good news, you're human. And this is also a really common experience. So, I know that you might feel like you're the only one feeling it this intensely, but I promise you you're not. I've worked with tens of thousands of helping and protecting professionals across cultures, across the country, organization

sectors. And, when I do the surveys, we're up there in the like 80, like high 80s, 90s percent, and everybody is really checking off a plethora of feelings and intensity, intense symptoms. So, you're, you're in company.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Absolutely. There was a study out of Hunter college and CUNY graduate school of public health and health policy, and they specifically focused on occupational hazard exposure in APS Professionals. And they found that virtually all APS workers, 97 percent, reported being exposed to one or more occupational hazards in their work. This is in the Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect. So, let's talk about what we could do other than hitting the bar after work, Taryn. Let's talk about more positive things we could do to manage this compassion fatigue.

**Taryn Hughes:** Right, between the humor, the alcohol. Okay, yeah. There's some there's definitely some other options. You know, one of the things I say is everybody knows the basics of self-care. Of course, if you can implement those, go ahead and implement them. Everybody's, you know, has a good level of self-discipline and responsibility to be able to do those things. But sometimes we can't, right? I think we all see that. And I would liken that to when you're living in this constant traumatic stress cycle, sometimes we can't access self-care because the intensity at, to what the intensity of what we're seeing, feeling, and hearing is just so high and overshadowing the, the more subtle choices of making our healthy choice for dinner, exercise, et cetera.

So, if you can't access self-care, don't be too hard on yourself. There's reasons why, but here's a couple of things that you can do. Um, one is just essentially turn the spotlight back on yourself because all day you're focused on other people, other people's wellbeing, health, safety, vitality, et cetera. So, you need to consciously turn the spotlight back on yourself. So, that you're the focus, you actually become the focus of your own life when you step away from work. And I know this is easier said than done, but it takes practice and you'll get into a routine with this. And one of the ways that you can bring the focus on yourself is to debrief. Either with yourself in a journal or with another person after your day or after, um, a traumatic incident.

And I want you to ask this question to yourself. I'm going to walk you through the question and then three parts. So, please take notes or rewind and come back to this. You want to ask, what is the impact on you? And so, when you step away from that situation, what is the impact on you? First, look at yourself physically, scan your body. Are you shaking? Are you exhausted or tired? Is your head hurting? Does your neck hurt? Are you thirsty? Do you need to go use the restroom? So, immediately it's like, yes, that happened. What's the impact on me? So, you scan your physical body and you either tell the person that you're debriefing with, or you write it down in your journal what's happening to you physically?

Then the second step is what's happening to you emotionally? Are you scared? Are you shaken up? Are you angry? Are you just like, just feel like you can't take it anymore? Like you want to walk away? Are you crying? Yes, yes. Are you crying? Are you? Are you ruminating? Are you thinking about this nonstop? So, you want to see what's happening to yourself emotionally and internally and tell the person that you're debriefing with, or again, write it in your journal. And then the third aspect is what's happening, what's the impact on you

logistically? So, I know sometimes when there are certain cases and maybe Jen, you can chime in, that logistically on certain calls, they're going to require much more paperwork.

They might require you to work later in that evening to work through the weekend to make different decisions. So, there's not just your physical and emotional state that you need to tend to, but maybe this changes your actual plans.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Well, I'm thinking of the cases where there aren't resources available, you know, you're looking at somebody who needs to move, but they won't do X, Y, and Z, but there's a year and a half wait list at a senior housing apartment building, you know, and that's just a simple example, but sometimes in the rural areas, you know, there's a lack of resources. So, that could be logistics that just don't blend well with a successful case.

**Taryn Hughes:** Exactly, exactly. So, what we're moving from is, it's not just what's happening to your clients. It's also what's happening to you. And so, when we start to flip the spotlight around and say, what's the impact on me? What the process actually calms your nervous system, brings you into connection with either yourself through your journal or another person through talking. And yeah, that can help you get to the point where you're more regulated and calm and able to breathe and get a drink of water, or eat, or take a break. And then you can start to apply yourself care because you're out of the fight, flight or freeze cycle. So, we really want to compassionately come towards each other and, and, worst-case scenario, come towards ourself in our journal to move out of that triggered state.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** So, that's what you have mentioned to me is called post traumatic growth, which I was fascinated with, like, wow, you could come out of this as a growing opportunity. So, tell us a little bit about that.

**Taryn Hughes:** Sure. You know, trauma, I think, gets a wrap. We think about trauma, and we want to turn away from it, avoid it, protect ourselves from it. And yes, of course, if we can avoid it and not have to live through it, perfect. But I don't think anybody here listening is working in a position where they're going to be sheltered from traumatic stress.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Right, right.

**Taryn Hughes:** So, one of the ways to look at it is look at post traumatic growth, which is how, how does this process change us as human beings? And what I found is for me, I really reoriented my priorities. I got really clear about what mattered, what's important in life and what's not. And it can help also facilitate us having more meaningful lives, which I'm guessing all of your audience can relate to where you get to do work. That's really meaningful and helpful to people in the world. And that's a professional experience that many people would wish to have. And then there's this sense of being able to deepen the relationships with not only ourselves through something like this, where we have to tend to ourselves at a higher level than the average population.

We have to, um, Maybe reach out for mental health support. We have to, if you do these debriefs, go through these conversations. And as you're having conversations with how you're impacted around the work, you can develop deeper, more meaningful relationships with your colleagues, with your loved ones. And I do find that it leads us towards what everybody is really searching for, which is community connections, honesty, you know, living a life in alignment with our values and that's really precious. So, not to lose sight of that.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Absolutely, and the APS Professionals I know love this field. It's just giving them the tools of how to handle all of the compassion fatigue they experience and the trauma they witnessed. So, it's good to know that there are positive things we can take away from our work as APS Professionals, and we can focus on that going forward. So, Taryn, for your time, and please let our listeners know how they can reach out to you to bring your wisdom into their local APS programs.

**Taryn Hughes:** Thanks, Jen. I really appreciate it. And I'm hoping this conversation lands and helps a lot of people. If you do want to find out more information, you can go to my website. It's [foresthughes.com](http://foresthughes.com). I'm based out of New York city, but I do work across the country and also internationally. And you can find out about staff trainings, we have leadership trainings, and coaching. Sometimes leaders need one-on-one coaching to, to get through this. It's more of a support. Um, and then of course, there's the option for individual support, so feel free to reach out. I'd love to hear from you. And I hope these tips are helpful for you.

**Jennifer Spoeri:** Wonderful. Thank you. And I hope you all out there listening have a good rest of your day. Take care.

**Andrew Capehart:** Thanks so much for listening. The APS TARC is a project of the Office of Elder Justice and Adult Protective Services at the Administration for Community Living Administration on Aging Department of Health and Human Services, and is administered by WRMA, Incorporated a TriMetrix Company in partnership with the National Adult Protective Services Association.

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