

Judicial Well-Being and Judicial Ethics

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Florida Judiciary Well Talks

February 24, 2025

Judge Victor Reyes(Ret.) 10th Judicial District Colorado

What stressors are unique
to Judicial Officers?



OFFICE POLITICS



WEIGHT OF DECISIONS



Trauma



Lack of Institutional Support



MANAGING STAFF



PUBLIC OPINION



PUBLIC CRITICISM



CASE LOAD CONTROL

1) CONTINUING EDUCATION

2) LAW ENFORCEMENT

3) CHANGING ROLE

4) CO-WORKERS

5) ISOLATION

6) ADEQUATE COMPENSATION

7) ROLE IN SOCIETY

8) Other...

PERSONAL LIFE

Four
years
into
being a
judge

2003



People v.
Paul Stark

2010



Questions For Ourselves As Judges

- ▶ What is my Obligation as to my own well-being
- ▶ Do I need to be Healed?
- ▶ What Do I Need to be Healed From?
- ▶ How Do I Start and then Continue the Healing Process?

Vicarious Trauma - definition

Impact resulting from the knowledge of the traumatizing events of others.



Counselor
s



Law
Enforcement



Emergency
Medical
Services



Fire
Services



Judges

Effects of Vicarious Trauma

- Physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, interpersonal, and spiritual
- May persist for months, sometimes years
- Parallels experience of trauma survivors
- Normal feelings and reactions
- Impacts the way you see the world



Common Reactions to Violence and Trauma

PHYSICAL

- Eating problems
- Fatigue
- Feeling sick to your stomach
- Sweating or chills
- Shock
- Dizziness
- Chest pains
- Trouble breathing



MENTAL

- Difficulty remembering things
- Trouble making decisions
- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- “Flashbacks”
- Nightmares
- Many thoughts at once
- Thinking about suicide

Common Reactions to Violence and Trauma (2)

Types of Feelings

Fear

Grief

Depression

Helplessness

Anger / Irritability

Feeling overwhelmed

Guilt

Vulnerability

Loss of common sense

Nervousness

Feeling not yourself

Behaviors

Changes in how you usually act

Withdrawing from other people

Clinging to other people

Silence

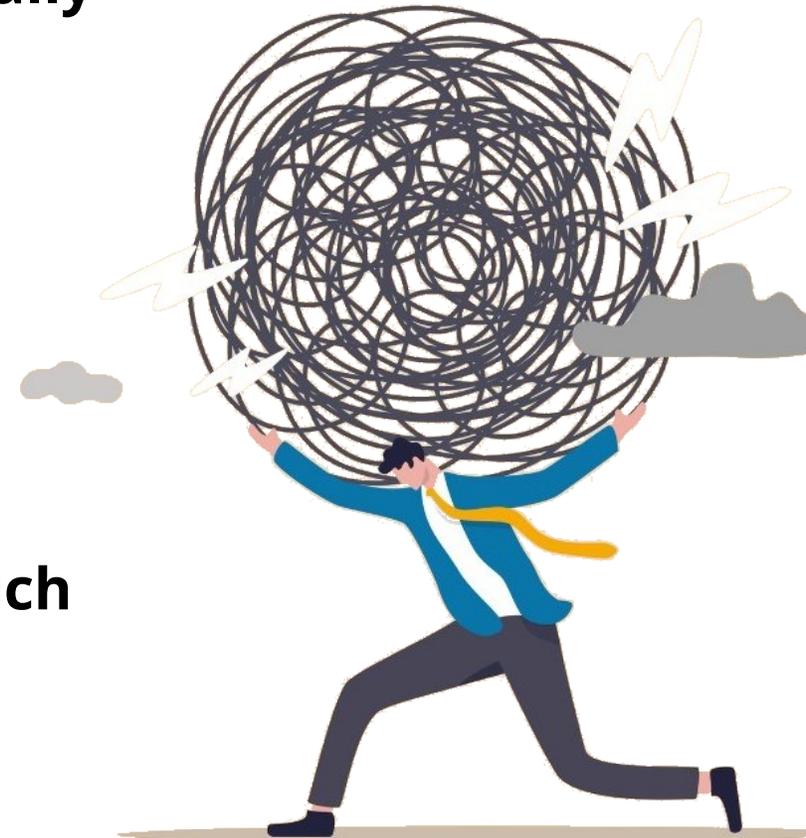
Talkativeness

Not eating/ overeating

Acting as if you were much younger

Dangerous behaviors

Substance abuse:



Major Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma (3)

Short-Term

Flashbacks

Angry

Sad, depression

Helplessness

Withdrawal

Sleeplessness

Anxiety

Long-Term

Cynical

Fearful

Inability to maintain
intimate
relationships

Loss of faith in
humanity

Alcohol abuse





Vicarious Trauma in the Courtroom

Why judges need to recognize and address their experiences of vicarious trauma

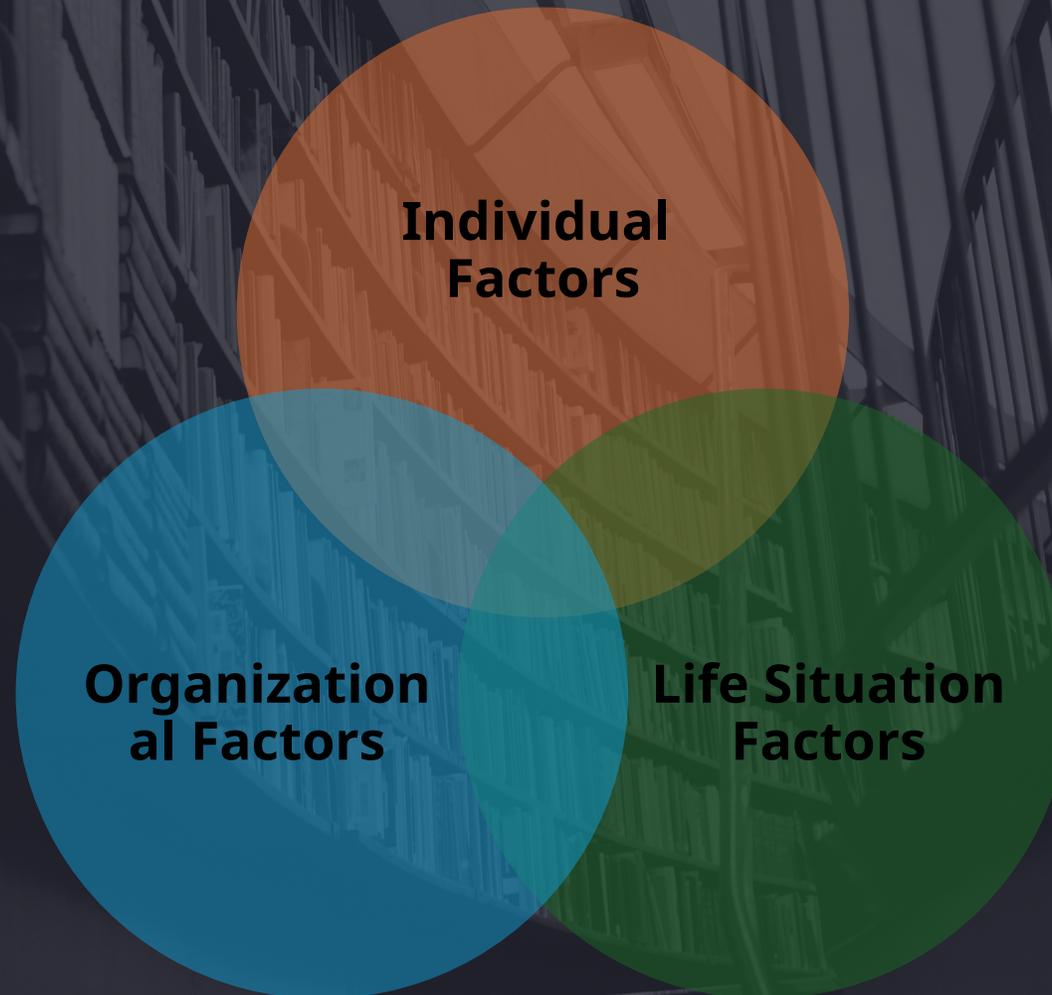
National Judicial Task Force to Examine State Courts' Response to Mental Illness

53%



have at least one symptom of vicarious trauma

Factors that Impact a Judge's Vulnerability to Vicarious Trauma



Part of the Dilemma

To whom
can judges talk about
their work or
problems?

Too often
the answer is

no one.



Silence Can Feel Toxic



Unable to respond
to threats or
disparaging
accusations



Judges suffer in silence



Not responding
to public comments
leads to internalized
stress

Tools to Assist in Acknowledging and Addressing Vicarious Trauma

Practical trauma-informed responses
to implement on and off the bench

Strategies Judges Can Use



• In the moment



• At home



• In chambers

The Goal is NOT to Avoid Vicarious Trauma



THE GOAL

Identifying and taking care of yourself as a person exposed to traumatic stressors

- Be aware of your triggers
- Find someone to debrief with
- Consider therapy if symptoms are persistent
- Be intentional: spend time in nature, seek spiritual connection, find purpose, and practice gratitude

Connection: Support System and Social Contacts

Talking about your own reactions to a violent event helps

- Choose people you trust and people who will really listen to how you feel.
- Supportive listeners may be friends, family, clergy members, teachers, self-help groups, or professional counselors.
- Isolating yourself from those who know and care about you may make





Nauru Declaration on Judicial Wellbeing

1. Judicial Well-being is essential and must be recognized and supported.
2. Judicial stress is not a weakness and must not be stigmatized.
3. Judicial well-being is a responsibility of individual judges and judicial institutions
4. Judicial well-being is supported by an ethical and inclusive judicial culture.
5. Promoting judicial well-being requires a combination of awareness-raising, prevention, and management activities.
6. Judicial well-being initiatives must suit the unique circumstances and requirements of national jurisdictions
7. Judicial well-being is enhanced by human rights.

Nauru Declaration on Judicial Well-being

July 25, 2025

3. Judicial well-being is a responsibility of individual judges and judicial institutions

- Judicial well-being is a shared responsibility, requiring action on the part of both individual judges and the judicial institutions. Individual judges must take active steps to maintain their well-being. Courts, including the judicial leadership and court management, must create working conditions conducive to judicial well-being.

World Wide Issue

- Judicial wellbeing is gaining worldwide recognition.
 - UN resolution established International Day for Judicial Well-being (July 25).
 - Wellbeing is essential to judicial integrity and effectiveness.

Judicial
wellbeing
and judicial
ethics are
interconnect
ed.

- A judge's mental, emotional, and physical health affects ethical conduct.
- Public confidence depends on both wellbeing and integrity.

What is Judicial Wellbeing ?

- Holistic health of judges:
 - Mental & Emotional Health
 - Physical Health
 - Social Wellbeing
 - Occupational, Intellectual, Spiritual Wellness

Model Code

- Independence: Judges must remain free from external influences, whether political, financial, or social. Independence safeguards the judiciary's ability to render decisions based solely on facts and law.
- Model Code of Judicial Conduct, Canon 1, Canon 2, Rule 1.2, Canon 4, Rule 2.4

Model Code

- Impartiality: Fairness requires that judges approach every case without bias or prejudice, treating all parties equally and with respect. MCJC Canon 1, Canon 2, Rule 2.2-2.4, Rule 2.9

Model Code

- Integrity: Honesty and moral uprightness are non-negotiable to maintaining public confidence...
- irresponsible comments by people outside of the judiciary has had a serious impact on the credibility of judges on the state and municipal level,
- actions taken by judges that may affirm these beliefs have a negative impact on all levels of the system.

Model Code

- Propriety: Judicial conduct both inside and outside the courtroom must uphold the dignity of the office and avoid actions that could bring the judiciary into disrepute.

Model Code

- Competence and Diligence: Judges must remain knowledgeable, prepared, and attentive, ensuring that legal proceedings are managed efficiently and justly

Mental & Emotional Health

- Exposure to trauma and high-stakes decisions.
 - Risk of burnout, secondary trauma, anxiety.
 - Emotional regulation is critical for ethical judgment.

Physical & Social Wellbeing

- Sedentary work and long hours impact health.
 - Judicial isolation limits social connection.
 - Threats to safety increase stress and anxiety.

Why Judicial Wellbeing Matters

- Impaired wellbeing affects decision-making.
 - Risk of errors and ethical lapses increases.
 - Healthy judges strengthen the rule of law.
 - Reduces premature departure from the bench.

Independence & Impartiality

- Freedom from political, financial, social pressures.
 - Fair and unbiased decision-making.
 - Stress can impair objectivity.

Reflection Exercise 1 – Self-Assessment

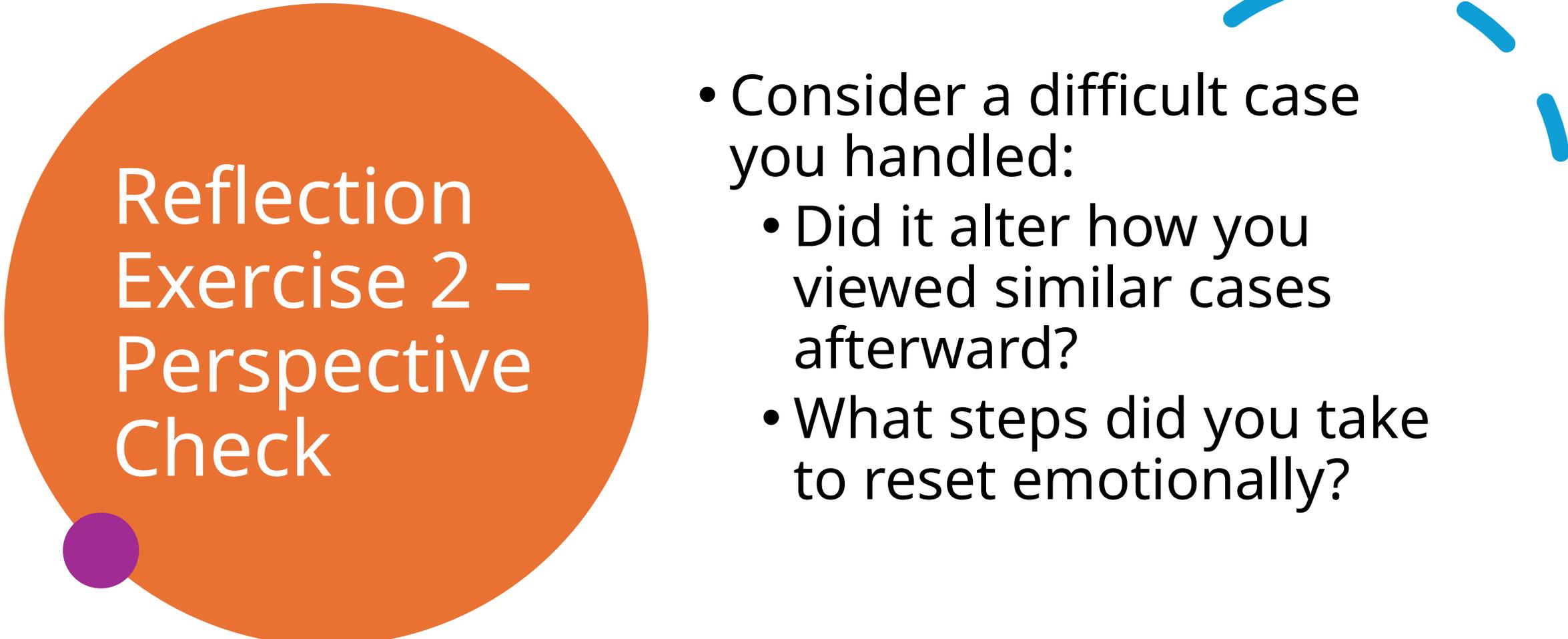
- Privately reflect:
 - How has stress affected your demeanor on the bench?
 - Have you noticed changes in patience or tolerance?
 - What signals tell you that you are fatigued?

Caseload & Resource Constraints

- Heavy dockets and administrative burdens.
 - Limited staff and research support.
 - Urban vs. rural disparities.

Emotional Impact of Trauma

- Exposure to violence and family conflict.
 - Risk of harsher sentencing or unconscious bias.
 - Need for awareness and reflection.

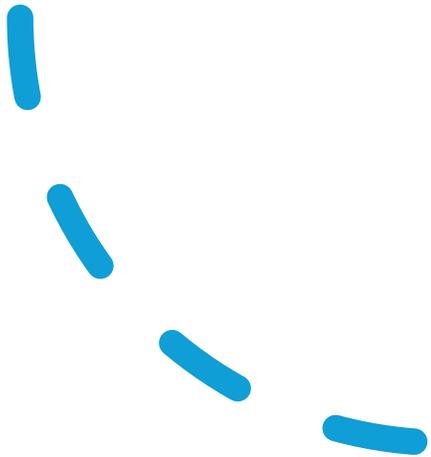


Reflection Exercise 2 – Perspective Check

- Consider a difficult case you handled:
 - Did it alter how you viewed similar cases afterward?
 - What steps did you take to reset emotionally?

Individual Strategies

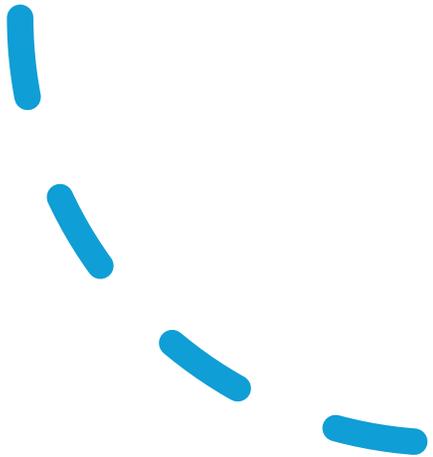
- Prioritize sleep, exercise, nutrition.
 - Set boundaries between work and home.
 - Seek confidential support.
 - Practice self-compassion.





Institutional Strategies

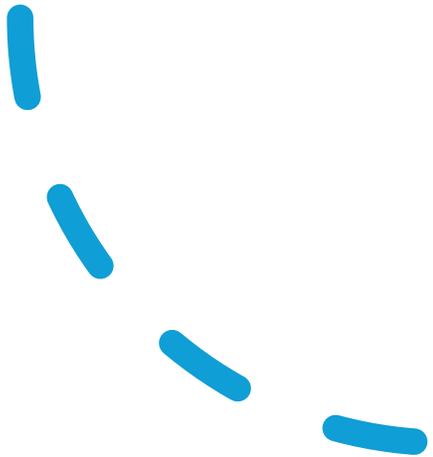
- Workload management.
 - Education on resilience & mental health.
 - Confidential counseling & peer support.
 - Security & physical health initiatives.





Reflection Exercise 3 – Ethical Lens

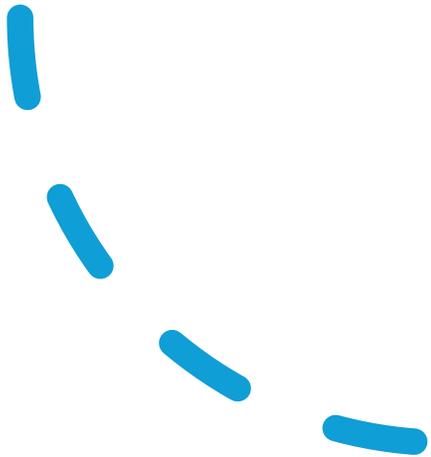
- If physical illness requires leave,
 - Should emotional distress be treated differently?
 - What ethical principle supports your answer?





Interactive Exercise – Mapping Support

- Write down:
 - 3 people you can confidentially speak with
 - 1 institutional resource available to you
 - 1 barrier preventing you from seeking help



Ethical Duty of Self-Awareness

- Judges must reflect on their state of mind.
 - Seeking help is an ethical responsibility.
 - Ending stigma in legal culture is essential.

Guided Reflection – Personal Philosophy

- Complete this sentence:
 - When cases become overwhelming, I remind myself that...
 - My core value in life that aligns with my judicial value is...
 - Does it manifest in your work? Why or Why Not?

Compassion in the Courtroom

- Compassion extends to the parties before you, those directly affected, and the community.
- Develop equanimity for everyone to avoid reserving your compassion for "more deserving."
- Giving yourself a break.
- Create a supportive work environment and foster what you create.
- Involve your entire staff.



Conclusion

- Wellbeing and ethics sustain the judiciary.
 - Healthy judges strengthen democracy.
 - Investment in judicial wellbeing is investment in justice.

THANK YOU

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www.healingjudges.com