

Vicarious Trauma information sheet

Vicarious Trauma refers to the indirect exposure to traumatic events and can impact people as much as the direct exposure to trauma. Vicarious Trauma can be induced from viewing graphic imagery, listening to accounts of traumatic events or supporting someone who is traumatised.

What is Vicarious Trauma?

- The British Medical Association (BMA) describe vicarious trauma as a 'process of change resulting from empathic engagement with trauma survivors'.
- Those whose work involves attending to those affected by trauma can acquire vicarious trauma. This includes, but is not limited to, humanitarian and human rights workers, medical professionals, social workers, emergency first responders, counsellors and psychotherapists, police officers and journalists.
- Vicarious trauma can also affect people through their personal lives if they are supporting a family member or friend who is going through, or who has been through, a traumatic experience.
- Vicarious trauma can affect those who listen to first-hand narratives or stories of people who have been traumatised. Sometimes referred to as *secondary trauma*, it describes how they are often impacted by the accounts they hear, picking up the 'emotional residue' of the original experience.
- The latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) incorporates understanding of vicarious trauma in its definition of trauma.

Graphic descriptions of suffering can leave lasting impressions on our hearts and minds.



What are the symptoms of Vicarious Trauma?

- **Strong emotions.** Vicarious trauma can leave people feeling *helpless, angry, despairing* or *sad*. It can also prompt feelings of *guilt* and *shame*. *Survivor* or *bystander guilt* describes the discomfort of being safe and well whilst being aware that other people are suffering or have experienced harm.
- **Numbness.** Vicarious trauma can also prompt people to experience emotional numbness or a sense of *disconnection*. This is often the mind and body's way of protecting us from feeling overwhelmed by exposure to traumatic material.
- **Overinvolvement, rescuing and/or erosion of boundaries.** When assisting those who have experienced trauma it is easy to become overinvolved, to feel we are the only ones who can help, and to take on a 'rescuing' approach. This can lead to lack of boundaries, which is a common feature of vicarious trauma – working beyond the remit of our roles and allowing less and less time for ourselves.
- **Avoidance.** Vicarious trauma may also lead people to step back from contact with those whose stories feature trauma. In a professional capacity they may call in sick or seek to avoid working with certain patients, clients or service-users. In their personal lives they may avoid people whose circumstances may expose them to further traumatic material.

- **Changes to outlook or worldview.** The profound nature of vicarious trauma can lead to changes in how we see the world around us. Despair or disillusionment may lead people to feel the world is no longer safe, or to question any faith they have. Anger at the injustice or harm others have suffered may also fuel a desire to fight back against those seen as being responsible.
- **Intrusive thoughts or images.** Trauma affects our ability to process and store memories in the usual way. Vicarious trauma may therefore mean we find distressing thoughts or images entering our minds against our will.
- **Changes to physical health and habits.** Vicarious trauma can leave people feeling exhausted and susceptible to aches, pains and other physical complaints such as digestive problems or an irregular heartbeat. This is often a consequence of a trauma response playing out within the body. Changes to sleeping patterns, appetite and diet may become apparent, alongside a desire to use alcohol or other substances to escape or relieve symptoms.
- **Seek balance within your life.** Although vicarious trauma is a very normal response to close encounters with suffering, it can affect people most when their lives have become unbalanced, and when they're allowing too little time for themselves. If the majority of your life is spent working with or attending to people who have experienced trauma, try to address this and rebalance. This may include:
 - spending more time with family and friends
 - engaging in hobbies, leisure activities or spiritual pursuits
 - simply allowing yourself the opportunity to relax and unwind at some point each day
- **Manage your exposure to additional traumatic material.** Certain types of avoidance can be a healthy strategy for anyone who feels they are experiencing vicarious trauma. If your work or day-to-day life involves a lot of exposure to trauma it may be helpful not to watch the news for a while if it is likely to feature distressing stories. Similarly, you might want to avoid films, TV shows and books that feature strong elements of violence or suffering.

Self-help tips for Vicarious Trauma

- **Foster self-compassion and avoid self-blame.** It can be easy for those experiencing vicarious trauma to feel they are 'weak' or should be coping better. This sometimes leads to self-blame or a reluctance to speak out and seek support. In reality, those working with trauma or encountering it regularly in their lives will inevitably be affected by it, often in ways they can't consciously control. If you feel you may be experiencing vicarious trauma, remind yourself that your response is a very human one, borne of caring for others and being impacted by their suffering.
- **Take care of your physical health.** Be mindful of how you look after your body by paying attention to your diet, exercise habits and sleeping regime.
 - Eating regular healthy meals and snacks can help avoid the energy dips and spikes that further aggravate trauma symptoms.
 - Incorporating movement into your life through exercise can help you to physically process and shake off any trauma held within your body.
 - If establishing a healthy sleeping regime feels difficult, consider learning more about sleep hygiene and consider speaking to a professional if nightmares or intrusive images disturb your sleep.

- Be mindful of your use of alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, or other substances such as drugs, which can further dysregulate your system and may also represent unhelpful avoidance of your situation.
- Many people find alternative therapies such as reflexology, aromatherapy and massage help with physical and psychological symptoms brought on by vicarious trauma.
- Speak to your GP or a medical professional about any persistent physical health issues.
- Find someone to talk to and consider professional support. Vicarious trauma can feel very isolating yet suffering alone can make it harder.
 - Although it may seem daunting to speak out about vicarious trauma, in a psychologically healthy workplace your manager should be able to assist you in terms of seeking further support or adjusting your duties for a while. Discussing vicarious trauma at work may also be a normalising experience if you are able to learn that other colleagues have had similar experiences.
 - If it feels hard to open up at work, consider seeking professional support independently. If doing this, it is worth trying to find a therapist, medical or mental-health professional who is *trauma-informed* and incorporates this into their approach.
- Vicarious Traumatization – Help for the helpers www.vicarious-traumatization.com website features further information and resources regarding vicarious trauma.
- Pearlman, L and Saakvitne, K. (1997), *Transforming the pain: Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization*. W. W. Norton & Company. Workbook helping individuals to assess, address and transform their vicarious traumatization.
- Rothschild, B., with Rand, M. (2006) *Help for the Helper: The Psychophysiology of Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma* W. W. Norton & Company. Exploration of the neurobiology, social psychology relating to therapist burnout.
- Dunkley, F. (2018) *Psychosocial Support for Humanitarian Aid Workers: A Roadmap for Trauma and Critical Incident Care* London and New York: Routledge. Although written specifically for humanitarian workers, this book is a helpful guide to anyone whose work exposes them to traumatic material.

Professional information for Vicarious Trauma & further useful information for those experiencing Vicarious Trauma

- The Headington Institute www.headington-institute.org website features a range of articles and resources relating to vicarious trauma and other work-related psychosocial issues for those in the care-giving professions. There is an e-learning module on the site about vicarious trauma.

FD Consultants

Individual support

At FD Consultants we can help individuals recover from vicarious trauma. We are a network of accredited therapists. We specialise in stress, anxiety, depression, burnout and trauma care.

Organisational support

For organisations looking for employee psychological support, FD Consultants are the well-being service who will best deliver a reliable, quick, and bespoke support system in the workplace. FD Consultant's team of accredited specialists will offer ongoing support to help manage stress, prevent burnout and provide specialist trauma care where required, enabling your staff with the tools to cope, and recover more quickly.