Staying Healthy When Working With Graphic Imagery and Content

A Short Guide for Human Rights and Humanitarian Workers
Working in a human rights or humanitarian role can mean working with very difficult material. Whether to expose injustice, document abuse of power, increase public awareness or to inform policy and programming decisions, it serves the greater good. But it can also cause you pain and difficulty.

This document seeks to support you in that aim by suggesting concrete and practical ways in which you can maintain your wellbeing. Whilst you are likely to be passionate about your work, it is still essential to pace yourself, and to take care of yourself and your colleagues. It is widely recognised and evidenced that exposure (direct and indirect) to traumatic material increases the possibility of psychological distress. It’s not about being strong or weak, it’s about recognizing the real impacts of encountering traumatic material and finding ways of dealing with it in healthy ways.

Research shows that when the possibility of vicarious trauma is not recognised or acknowledged, people may be more detrimentally affected because there are few, if any, efforts to prevent or reduce this harm. Managing vicarious trauma is the responsibility of the individual and the organisation asking their staff/contractors to view traumatic content.

- 40% of Human rights workers or journalists said that viewing distressing content had an adverse effect on their private lives. Professionals have, for example, developed a negative view of the world, feel isolated, experience flashbacks, nightmares and stress related medical conditions. Many interview respondents reported being diagnosed with vicarious trauma or PTSD, self referral to professional counseling and some had even resigned where they had no organisational support. – Eyewitness Media Hub, 2015
• Research also indicates that staff who are affected by vicarious trauma are less likely to ask their managers for support (only 35% would ask for help)

Vicarious trauma is an inevitable occupational challenge for those gathering and viewing graphic content. However, the negative impact of vicarious trauma may be prevented, managed, or even be transformed into positive growth.

There is an increased psychosocial risk when there is [1]:

• prior traumatic experiences;
• social isolation, both on and off the job;
• a tendency to avoid feelings, withdraw, or assign blame to others in stressful situations;
• difficulty expressing feelings;
• lack of preparation, orientation, training, and supervision in their jobs;
• being newer employees and less experienced at their jobs;
• constant and intense exposure to trauma with little or no variation in work tasks; and
• lack of an effective and supportive process for discussing traumatic content of the work.

Direct and indirect exposure to graphic material without proper support may result in an array of negative psychosocial impacts. Most commonly: burnout and depression, relational problems, secondary and post traumatic stress, substance abuse, and general dysfunction in work and life.

[1] Office for Victims of Care. Vicarious Trauma Toolkit (see resources below)
Drawing on good practice [2], below are a few tips on how to prevent individuals being harmed from continuous exposure to graphic imagery and content.

Understand what you are dealing with
Think of traumatic imagery as if it is radiation, a toxic substance that has a dose-dependent effect. Humanitarian workers, like nuclear workers, have a job to do; at the same time, they should take sensible steps to minimise unnecessary exposure. Frequency of viewing may be more of an issue than overall volume, so think about pacing your trauma-image load and ensuring down time.

Eliminate needless repeat exposure
Review your sorting and tagging procedures, and how you organise digital files and folders, among other procedures, to reduce unnecessary viewing. When verifying footage by cross-referencing images from a wide variety of sources, taking written notes of distinctive features may help to minimise how often you need to recheck against an original image. And never pass the material onto a co-worker without some warning as to what the files contain.

Experiment with different ways of building some distance into how you view images.
Some people find concentrating on certain details, for instance clothes, and avoiding others (such as faces) helps. Consider applying a temporary matte/mask to distressing areas of the image. Film editors should avoid using the loop play function when trimming footage of violent attacks and point of death imagery; or use it very sparingly. Develop your own workarounds.

[2] dartcenter.org/resources/handling-traumatic-imagery-developing-standard-operating-procedure
Try adjusting the viewing environment
Reducing the size of the window or adjusting the screen’s brightness or resolution can lessen the perceived impact. Try turning the sound off when you can - it is often the most affecting part.

Take frequent screen breaks
Look at something pleasing, walk around, stretch or seek out contact with nature (such as greenery and fresh air etc.). All of these can all help dampen the body’s distress responses. In particular, avoid working with distressing images just before going to sleep. It is more likely to populate your mental space. (And be careful with alcohol - it disrupts sleep and makes nightmares worse).

There is strong evidence [3] that the computer game Tetris [4] can be used as a tool to reduce intrusions from trauma exposure. Research demonstrated significant reductions in intrusions if Tetris is played in the immediate window after exposure, and also if deployed a day later, after memories of the traumatic scenario had time to consolidate during sleep.

Cultivate “transition habits” from personal life to work life. Building in a regular practice that symbolizes going-to-work, and returning-home assists in separation and re-gearing your mind for what’s coming. Consider sharing a transition file to your team at the end of the day. It could be a picture of a relaxing landscape, a comedy skit, or any other pleasant image or story. Avoid graphic or traumatic material in your free time (i.e. don’t watch horror films in the evenings, or scroll through news feeds).

Tips to prevent harm to exposure

Additional Tips

Every member of a team should be briefed on normal responses to trauma. Team members should understand that different people cope differently, how the impact can accumulate over time, and how to recognise when they or their colleagues need to practice more active self-care. This applies to all workers including support and technical staff.

Have clear guidelines on how graphic material is stored and distributed. Feeds, files and internal communications related to traumatic imagery should be clearly signposted and distributed only to those who need the material.

Unexpected exposure to distressing eyewitness video was almost universally cited by interviewees as having a more traumatic impact upon them in comparison to distressing images and video that the individual was prepared to view. Some organisations have taken technical steps and altered workflows to mitigate the chances of staff seeing distressing images they are not prepared for. (Eyewitness media hub report, 2015)

And finally, viewing images where there is a personal connection could increase the distress and trauma of working with such images. If possible, avoid working on images that have the familiarity of home or personal experience. Particular care should be taken with material that reminds you of personal oppressive acts such as arrest, interrogation, sexual assault, or others.
Personal Awareness

Are you experiencing any of these signs of vicarious trauma?

Being aware of your personal warning signs and making adjustments is key in preventing psychosocial distress.

This is different for everyone and only you know best. Some common symptoms for vicarious trauma include:

**Extreme tiredness**
This kind of fatigue is felt in the mind and the body, and makes even simple tasks feel overwhelming. This may also feel like being emotionally shut down or numb. Notice changes in your energy levels.

**Physical complaints**
Such as headaches, back and neck pain, stomach problems, weight gain/loss, and increased sickness.

**Difficulty focusing**
Forgetfulness & difficulty in making decisions

**Social withdrawal**
And not engaging in activities that you previously enjoyed

**Sleep problems**

**Relational problems**
And interpersonal conflict with co-workers, friends or family

**Feeling less motivated by your work**

**Symptoms of post-traumatic stress**
- Re-experiencing: nightmares, intrusive thoughts or images, flashbacks
- Hyperarousal: feeling constantly nervous and jumpy
- Avoiding: Avoiding reminders of trauma
- Mood: Mood swings and changes in beliefs

Are you experiencing any of these signs of vicarious trauma?
Taking Care of Yourself

By taking ownership of your own wellbeing, you increase your chances for good health, wellbeing, and even personal growth.

According to the journal of Traumatic Stress, some of the protective factors include: years of experience in the profession, more time spent in self-care activities, and high self-efficacy. [5] While organisations have a duty of care to provide you with adequate support for your work, the following are some ideas for taking care for yourself.

Craft your own self-care plan.

Creating a self-care plan will be a trial-and-error exploration.

Because your circumstance and needs change over time, so should your methods for staying well. Below are some ideas based on evidence and practice, but each person has their own style and personality when it comes to wellbeing.

Create a working environment that is pleasant.
Regardless of where you are working, think about: plants, art, color of paint, natural light, your desk, your chair, cushions. Do you have positive images in your space?

Have a life outside of work.
Even if you are not in the mood, push yourself to engage in activities that you have enjoyed in the past. Is there a local football (or running, cycling, cricket, volleyball, etc..) club you can join? Where do you find pleasure? Are there educational programmes that you can enroll in? Maintain friendship and family networks that are separate to work that help bring perspective.

Some of the staples of wellbeing:
Eat nutritious meals. If you don’t like cooking a nice meal for yourself, ask others to come over and share a meal with you.
How many times in a week would you like to have a visitor in your home? Rest. Resting isn’t only taking a break from an activity, but also rejuvenating for what’s coming. Getting away and regaining a sense of pride and meaning in your important work will keep you motivated as you return to work.
Exercise: Physical exercise increases good mood and can have as much impact as medication when it comes to depression. Moreover, physical exercise increases energy, good health, and an ability to resist negative stress. Connect with people—even if you don’t want to talk about work. Many studies show that positive relationships are the #1 protective factor for overall health and wellbeing.

Establishing a good daily, weekly and monthly routine:
Ask yourself: What are your most productive working hours? What rhythm of breaks help you be at your best on a daily, weekly and annual basis? What kind of sleep routine are you happy with? How many times do you get outside during the day or week? Do you have a specific routine for transitioning between work and personal life? Have you scheduled your next holiday?

Increase opportunities to be creative and have a good laugh.
What are your curiosities and how can you maintain playfulness?

Reflect and acknowledge the positive impacts of your work.
How has your work allowed you to growth personally? What do you appreciate about being part of your team? What strengths have you noticed about yourself over the past year(s)?

These are thought-starters for your unique self-care plan. Don’t let your eyes read over these words without making an action plan. Put something in the diary or pick up the phone and call someone. What lifestyle changes can you make in helping you thrive?
Craft your own self-care plan

Knowing your limitations and seeking support when needed is key to maintaining wellbeing. Seeking support in early stages of distress goes a long way towards recovering more quickly. Thrive Worldwide can support you with confidential counseling. Vicarious trauma, left unchecked can have serious psychological, relational, and career impacts. Take the Headington Institute’s “Are you showing signs of burnout” assessment and score yourself. If you are concerned with your level of vicarious stress, reach out to a colleague or Thrive Worldwide staff.
Identifying triggers and trends by monitoring data collected during the course of the employment cycle is a good way to spot growing health issues. Consider the following as good indicators for spotting signs of ill health in your organisation or team/project:

- A 10-20% increase in staff turnover - a higher turnover of employees over a period of time could indicate undue pressure of work or management issues
- A 10-20% increase in sickness absence rates
- A 10-20% increase in health interventions - occupational or medical health
- A 10-20% increase in grievance or discipline cases
- A serious incident has directly impacted a member of the organisation
- Personnel are operating in a very high risk situation over long periods of time
- The areas personnel work are difficult to access due to risk
- The location’s risk levels have increased
- Reported lack of access to recreational activities
- Restrictions on movements/curfews due to security
- Serious employee relations issue
- Delivery of work hampered by security or under-performing team
- Bad publicity about the programme or organisation

How many of the above would be a trigger for ill health in your team? Explore with your team/organisation some structures that can manage or mitigate the impact of working with traumatic material. What are the relevant inputs in cultivating a vicarious trauma-informed organisation? One of the most common interventions in peer support:

**Peer support.**
Many people you speak with in your personal life won’t be able to understand your work and its stressors. It can feel isolating without sharing your thoughts and feelings with anyone. For this reason, peer support is a key support mechanism. Colleagues/Peer supporters are trained in basic psychosocial techniques such as: active listening, validating and normalizing feelings, creating emotional safety to talk about difficulties, recognize early warning signs and signposting when needed.

- How could this work in your organisation? Buddy system? Training needs?
- Would your organisation consider having non-work related peer support or buddy systems?
- How can management set the expectation that people can speak about how they are doing?

Contact us if you would like support in making a plan to address vicarious trauma in your organisation: info@thrive-worldwide.org
How can we support you?

Email us at info@thrive-worldwide.org to learn more

Vicarious Trauma: Awareness Training for Staff
Staff will learn self-management and risk mitigation skills to reduce the impact of Vicarious Trauma. They will then create their own personal action plan that fits within the overall plan of their team.

Vicarious Trauma: Awareness Training for Managers
Managers will learn how to recognise, manage and mitigate against Vicarious Trauma. They will then learn to create a bespoke action plan to support their team.

Group Psychological Reviews
We facilitate in-person or online group conversations for staff to share their difficulties, with a focus on the impact of Vicarious Trauma, to validate common struggles and provide mutual support.

Counselling
Our qualified psychological therapists offer online or in-person confidential counselling for individuals experiencing emotional responses arising from work or travel.
Resources

**Vicarious Trauma Toolkit**
From the US Office for Victims of Crime, the VTT is designed for organizations that are seeking to become vicarious trauma-informed by proactively raising awareness and addressing the impact of critical incidents and ongoing exposure to traumatic events on the job. [https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/](https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/).

The toolkit has a compendium of over 500 resources (articles, tools, workshops)

[https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/compendium#](https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/compendium#)

**The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma**
This has several useful resources and tools:

- [https://dartcenter.org/resources/handling-traumatic-imagery-developing-standard-operating-procedure](https://dartcenter.org/resources/handling-traumatic-imagery-developing-standard-operating-procedure)

- [https://dartcenter.org/content/staying-sane-managing-stress-and-trauma-on-investigative-projects](https://dartcenter.org/content/staying-sane-managing-stress-and-trauma-on-investigative-projects)

- [https://dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery](https://dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery)

**Holistic Security is a website for Human Rights Defenders**
This examines Physical, Psychological and Digital security. It provides advice and resources in 4 areas: Prepare, Explore, Strategize, and Act.

[https://holistic-security.tacticaltech.org/introduction.html](https://holistic-security.tacticaltech.org/introduction.html)

**Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma: Module Four.**
Headington Institute, 2008


Chapter 12: Trauma and Self Care.

[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Chapter12-MHRM.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Chapter12-MHRM.pdf)

**Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline.**

Annex One

The Five Organizational Strategies from OVC’s vicarious trauma-informed organisations toolkit.

These are the five key areas of organizational health that are used to organize the VT–ORG and the resources in the toolkit:

Leadership and Mission

To address the impact of vicarious trauma, leaders in vicarious trauma-informed organizations proactively integrate strategies into workplace values, operations, and practices; maintain a clear vision that supports and articulates the agency’s mission; and regularly model and promote open and respectful communication. What the research literature tells us:

- Leadership can sustain staff by anticipating and responding to staff needs, showing appreciation, and creating safe forums for communication (McFarlane and Bryant 2007; Howlett and Collins 2014).

- Advocates who received more support from supervisors, coworkers, and work teams experienced lower levels of secondary traumatic stress (Slattery and Goodman 2009).

- Open and transparent communication regarding organizational mission, strategy, resources, and implementation of policies and procedures provides a strong foundation within the agency (Brondolo et al. 2008).

- Greater access to the organization’s strategic information lowers levels of vicarious trauma (Choi 2011).

Management and Supervision

To fulfill their obligation to lessen the impact of vicarious trauma, managers and supervisors in vicarious trauma-informed organizations foster supportive relationships based on inclusivity, mutual respect, and trust; promote policies and practices that lessen the negative impact of the work; seek out and support staff following critical or acute incidents; and conduct performance evaluations that include discussions of vicarious trauma. What the research literature tells us:

- Quality supervision—when staff feel safe and respected—enables staff to overcome high workloads and stay on the job (Slattery and Goodman 2009; Bednar 2003).

- Having a structured protocol in place for case review, along with collegial team reflection and support, helps counter the impact of vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress (Howlett and Collins 2014; Geller, Madsen, and Ohrenstein 2004).

Employee Empowerment and Work Environment

To promote and maintain a healthy work environment, vicarious trauma-informed organizations foster teamwork; encourage collaboration both within and outside the organization; create formal and informal opportunities for staff to connect with one another; and offer opportunities to diversify job tasks. What the research literature tells us:

- Positive work environments provide quality service outcomes and decrease staff turnover (Glisson and Green 2006; Shim 2010; Strolin-Goltzman 2009).
Supportive work environments reduce the negative impact of vicarious trauma (Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton 2003; Slattery and Goodman 2009).

Training and Professional Development

To strive for professional competency, capacity, and staff retention, vicarious trauma-informed organizations promote continuing education, professional development, and networking opportunities; provide thorough orientation and ongoing training; enable access to resources; and support staff participation in on- and offsite learning opportunities. What the research literature tells us:

- Being trained in vicarious traumatization benefits both participants and the populations they serve (Gentry, Baggerly, and Baranowsky 2003).

- Job-specific training strengthens confidence and competence in performance and builds networks (Saakvitne and Pearlman 1996; Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton 2003; Howlett and Collins 2014).

Staff Health and Wellness

To maintain the health and wellness of their staff, vicarious trauma-informed organizations recognize links between health/wellness and staff satisfaction and productivity; devote time and resources to promoting staff well-being; encourage and provide health and wellness activities; and incorporate wellness into policies and practices. What the research literature tells us:

- Mindfulness programs increase compassion satisfaction and decrease compassion fatigue (Thieleman and Cacciatore 2014).