

Vicarious Trauma

A Thrive Worldwide Resource

Traumatic events may produce powerful emotions: fear, anger, disgust, shame. Strong emotions like these don't just dissipate into thin air but may be shared and transferred wherever encountered.

Hearing about or seeing someone else's pain instinctually makes us think of how that pain would affect us, and may eventually begin to shape our inner experience.

Workers who are regularly exposed to other people's trauma are at risk of vicarious trauma; having similar feelings to the person or group you are working with.

Vicarious traumatization doesn't happen overnight but may build up over time due to the nature of your work. Recognizing the toxicity of trauma and its potential psychosocial impact is the starting point for defending yourself against it, as well as the possibility for growing through it (vicarious resilience).



The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.

KITCHEN TABLE WISDOM, DR. RACHEL REME

Sectors such as: law enforcement, fire- fighters, victim services, and emergency medical services, have been strategic about addressing vicarious trauma for years.

However, it has been less recognized as an occupational hazard for front line humanitarian workers, communication/appeals teams, and human-rights defenders. For these workers to thrive, we need to be aware, prevent, and manage vicarious trauma.

WHAT INCREASES THE RISK OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

- Past experiences of trauma and the extent to which the person or material you're working with is similar to your own trauma.
- Working and/or living in isolation.
- History of or current mental illness or substance abuse.
- Lack of experience working with traumatic material or stories.
- Repetitive work on trauma material with little variation.
- A lack of recognition by yourself or your organisation around the nature of traumatic material.
- A tendency to deny or avoid person

TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS WORKING WITH DIFFICULT MATERIAL AND STORIES

- Eat nutritious meals and drink enough water. If you don't like cooking a nice meal for yourself, ask others to come over and share a meal with you.
- Connect with people-and don't always talk about work. Many studies show that positive relationships are the #1 protective factor for overall health and wellbeing.
- 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.
- Create constraints for working with difficult material such as: limiting duration of exposure, reducing screen size and volume, working with a partner or team, labelling files and knowing what you are going to view.
- 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.
- Feel and acknowledge the difficult emotion when it's time to feel it, and let it go when it's time to let it go. Allows you to maintain your sense of human connection and protects you from over-thinking and accumulating dangerous levels of trauma.
- Avoid unnecessary exposure to trauma materials outside of work horror films, news/media, challenging conversations.



**Almost everything will work again if you
unplug it for a few minutes...
Including you.**

~ ANNE LAMOTT

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visit www.thrive-worldwide.org
email info@thrive-worldwide.org

Resource Author
Ben Porter

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