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# Vicarious Trauma

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**ThriveWorldwide**

# 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 traumatising 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).

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.

***“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.”***

Dr. Rachel Remen

## What increases the risk of vicarious trauma?

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

# Tips for working with difficult material and stories

## **Limit exposure to traumatic situations and material**

While encountering trauma and suffering may be a big part of your day job, avoid unnecessary exposure outside of work (horror films, news/media, conversations). Take regular leave without carrying out your work.

## **While at work, reduce the impact of the traumatic material**

Create parameters for working with difficult material such as: limiting the duration of exposure, reducing screen size and volume, working with a partner or team, labeling files, and knowing what you are going to view.

## **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?

## **Feel and acknowledge the difficult emotion when it's time to feel it**

But let it go when it's time to let it go. This is easier said than done, but this simple idea allows you to maintain your sense of human connection and protects you from overthinking and accumulating dangerous levels of vicarious trauma. One way that counselors and therapists do this is by creating transition habits of moving from one space to another. This may be a physical act such as a walk after work, or a relaxing activity like listening to music, or an immersive activity like swimming. Whatever it is, let it represent the end of dwelling in the pain and suffering of others and the beginning of enjoying the other aspects of your life.

## **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.

## **Get enough 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 the ability to resist negative stress.

## **Connect with people outside of work**

Push yourself to engage in activities that you have enjoyed in the past. Many studies show that positive relationships are the #1 protective factor for overall health and wellbeing.

### **Know your personal triggers**

If necessary or prudent, avoid working on projects that have the familiarity of home or personal experiences. Past traumatic experiences can resurface when encountering similar situations, potentially impacting your emotional and mental wellbeing.

### **Establish 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?

### **Get professional supervision**

Talking with someone who is experienced and qualified in supervising vicarious trauma can help you process your emotions or challenges. An MHPSS supervisor can be someone internal to your organisation or an external supervisor who offers guidance and mentorship without interfering with your programme or casework. Meetings should be scheduled and predictable.

### **Take regular breaks**

Look at something pleasing, walk around, stretch or seek out contact with nature (think green space and blue spaces). All of these can all help mitigate the body's distress responses. In particular, avoid working with distressing images and stories just before going to sleep and develop some good sleep hygiene habits.

***“Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes—including you”***

Anne Lamott



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