Traumatic events can produce powerful emotions. Fear. Anger. Disgust. Shame. And strong emotions like these don’t just go away, but can be shared and transferred wherever they are encountered.

Hearing about or seeing someone else’s pain instinctually makes us think how that pain would affect us, and it 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 traumatisation doesn’t happen overnight but may build up over time due to the nature of your work. Recognising 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, firefighters, victim services, and emergency medical services have been strategic about addressing vicarious trauma for years. However, it has been less recognised 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 Reme
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
This includes: 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
This is easier said than done, but it 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
For example, horror films, news/media, challenging conversations.
FURTHER SUPPORT

We can offer you or a member of your team a range of psychosocial services including:

Counselling
A safe space with a trained therapist for anyone struggling through personal issues:
www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/counselling

Vicarious Trauma Mitigation For Managers
Learn to respond well if anyone in your team is exposed to indirect trauma:
www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/vicarious-trauma-mitigation-for-managers

Vicarious Trauma Awareness & Resilience
Help your team understand how contact with the suffering of others can impact them, and what they can do about it:
www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/vicarious-trauma-awareness-and-resilience

Learn more at www.thrive-worldwide.org/services. Or book an appointment by emailing info@thrive-worldwide.org

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Want to talk?

We’re ready to support you

thrive-worldwide.org/contact-us

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