

Overview of Vicarious Trauma

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People are drawn to the helping professions and careers in human services for a wide variety of reasons. They may feel a calling to assist in relieving others' suffering and to help them heal from their emotional wounds or deal with significant life adversity or disability that impacts daily life. They may have been traumatized themselves and wish to share the coping skills they've learned with others going through similar issues. Or they may feel caring for others brings meaning and a sense of purpose to their lives.

Whatever their reasons for becoming a helping professional, they may experience vicarious trauma through the stories told or lived experience of the people they work with or support. This secondary trauma, sometimes referred to as compassion fatigue, can seriously hinder their work if they remain unaware of its negative impact and/or do not practice sufficient self-care strategies.

Definition

Vicarious trauma is commonly understood to refer to the cumulative transformative effect on the helper of working with people who have experienced traumatic life events, both positive and negative; or the "transformation in the inner experience of the therapist that comes about as a result of empathic engagement with clients' traumatic material". The impacts on the workers thoughts, feelings, behaviours and general sense of self can be similar to the difficulties faced by the people we are working with. The term 'vicarious traumatisation' is often used specifically to refer to professionals 'secondary traumatic stress' or 'secondary victimisation.' It is often used more broadly to refer to those in a significant relationship with the person directly affected.

Common Signs of Vicarious Trauma

Becoming aware of the signs of compassion fatigue is the first step in addressing the issue. The following are some red flags:

Emotional	Behavioural	Physical/ Physiological	Spiritual	Cognitive
Prolonged grief	Isolation	Headaches	Changed relationship with meaning and hope	Cynicism
Prolonged anxiety	Avoidance	Hives or rashes	Lack of sense of purpose	Becoming judgmental of others
Prolonged sadness	Numbing	Heartburn	Decreased sense of urgency	Negativity
Irritability	Staying at work longer	Migraines	Reduced sense of connection to others	Thinking about clients' traumas when at home/ not at work
Labile mood	Not being able to separate work from personal life	Stomach ulcers	Challenged to maintain a sense of self as viable, worth loving, deserving	Difficulty thinking clearly, concentrating, and remembering things
Depression	Increased alcohol consumption	Tics		Difficulty making day-to-day decisions
Agitation/anger	Undertaking risky behaviours	Anxiety		
Changed sense of humour	Avoiding people or duties	Hot Sweats		
Tuning out	Difficulty sleeping			
Feeling less safe in the world	Changed eating habits			



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Which professions are most likely to experience

Vicarious Trauma?

Some of the professionals most likely to experience compassion fatigue include psychologists, social workers, child welfare workers, emergency workers, police officers, fire-fighters, and ministers. However, anyone working with trauma is susceptible to vicarious trauma. Helping professionals who have been subjected to trauma themselves also may be more at risk for developing compassion fatigue, especially if they have not worked through their issues.

Developing an adequate self-care strategy is key to preventing or overcoming vicarious trauma. Some of the techniques that can be used include:

These tips may help you to cope with or prevent the symptoms above from occurring.

- Organise to have some supervision, or debriefs with colleagues
- Acknowledge the difficulties or changes you are experiencing in your thoughts, emotions and attitudes. If you are concerned, discuss them with someone
- Maintain a regular and healthy diet, and make time to exercise
- Balance your workload with relaxation, and also pay attention to the types of clients you are seeing throughout the day and week. Try to arrange clients so that emotional burdens do not cluster in your schedule
- Identify thoughts or beliefs that are meaningful to you or give you hope, and maintain a connection with them
- Seek professional help for physical and/or mental health problems that you are experiencing

- Maintain social and supportive relationships
- Take time to do things you enjoy by yourself, like getting a massage
- Write in a journal or diary
- Find physical activities that are fun and/or spontaneous such as swimming, dancing, playing sports, singing or running
- Allow someone else to take care of you (i.e. go somewhere you will be waited on)
- Revisit favourite books or movies
- Find activities that allow you to express feelings such as anger, happiness, grief or sadness
- Monitor and decrease any unnecessary stressors (i.e. say 'no' when you need to)
- Find places or people where you feel comfortable and relaxed, go there often

Although all helping professionals are in danger of developing compassion fatigue, especially when working with individuals who have experienced traumatic events, having a self-care plan in place can help reduce the risks.

Content used as reference material for this article included material from: Livingwell.org.au and GoodTherapy.org.



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