Understanding and Coping with Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma is a type of stress reaction that arises as the result of witnessing or hearing about other people's pain and suffering. Vicarious trauma is sometimes talked about as a type of secondary stress because it is stress you experience as a result of what happens to other people.

Who is vulnerable to vicarious trauma?

Experiencing vicarious trauma is an occupational hazard for many professionals, including medical staff, humanitarian workers, human rights advocates, content moderators, and others.

What are common signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma?

If you are experiencing vicarious trauma, you may experience some common signs of stress, including:

- ✓ Disturbed sleep (difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep, or disturbing dreams or nightmares)
- ✓ Somatic symptoms such as headaches and body aches
- ✓ Feeling irritable or angry
- ✓ Feeling distracted or unable to focus
- ✓ Difficulty relaxing and winding down
- ✓ Feelings of sadness, grief, helplessness, hopelessness
- ✓ Increased use of substances such as alcohol and sleeping medication

However, if you are experiencing vicarious trauma, you will probably also experience some or all of the following:

1. Signs of post-traumatic stress

These can include:

- ✓ Intrusive thoughts about distressing material
- ✓ Increase in worry/anxiety/rumination
- ✓ Being easily startled and feeling on high-alert all the time
- ✓ Avoiding distressing material and reminders of distressing events

2. Changes to sense of meaning, purpose, and spirituality

Vicarious trauma often has a particular impact on your worldview—your core beliefs and assumptions about the way the world works. Vicarious trauma frequently challenges and changes your core beliefs about the existence and nature of meaning, purpose and a higher power, and your own identity and responsibilities. Among other things, this can show up as:

- ✓ Feeling you have lost your sense of meaning, purpose and hope
- ✓ Feeling cynical and/or guilty

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3. Changes in relationships

VT changes how you relate to yourself and others—it influences your ability to feel empathy and compassion, to feel connected to yourself, and to feel connected to other important people in your life. As such, vicarious trauma also influences the way you act and interact with people. Ways this often shows up include:

- ✓ Reduced ability to feel compassion and empathy
- ✓ Difficulty feeling connected to what is going on around and within you
- ✓ Difficulty accepting or feeling okay about yourself. Your sense of relationship with self and others is negatively transformed.
- ✓ Problems managing the boundaries between yourself and others (e.g., taking on too much responsibility, having difficulty leaving work at the end of the day, trying to step in and control other's lives).

How can VT show up in behavior?

Vicarious trauma can negatively affect how you feel about yourself, your work, your colleagues, and the overall functioning and effectiveness of the organization. Over time, you can be drawn into unhelpful patterns with how you relate and react to the work and other people.

This table[1] identifies some of the common patterns that can arise under the influence of vicarious trauma.

OVER-INVOLVEMENT ←————————————→ **UNDER-INVOLVEMENT**

Working With		*Moving Away*	
Rescuing Excessive responsibility for others Trying to fix everything Doing it all	Curious Wanting to know more Empathy Taking responsibility for actions & impact Developing strategies Advocacy	Observing Reflecting Professional detachment Maintaining boundaries Variety of activities to invest in	Pre-occupied with efficiency Rigidity Cynicism No responsibility or concern for actions and impact Preoccupied with less important issues

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[1] Table adapted from *QPASTT (2016) Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Vicarious Trauma.* Queensland Program Of Assistance To Survivors Of Torture and Trauma QPASTT Guidebook.

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It is natural to slide back and forth along the continuum somewhat, depending on context. However, when you recognize you are spending more time in the orange zone it is important to try to understand what may be going on for you, and then take action.

What can you do to prevent and recover from vicarious trauma?

Being impacted by vicarious trauma is a predicable outcome of being in a job that is focused on helping others during or after traumatic experiences. So what can you do about this?

The 4C's provides a useful framework that can help us identify effective strategies when it comes to preventing and managing vicarious trauma.

1. Consciousness

This reminds us of the importance of being conscious, mindful, and aware of what we are experiencing and how we are reacting over time.

When we understand more about vicarious trauma and how it can influence us, we can become more conscious of how we are reacting and coping.

When we can monitor ourselves more effectively, we are better equipped to decide what we need at different points in order to best prevent and address vicarious trauma.

2. Connection

Connection is one of our best buffers against emotional distress. There are at least two really important aspects of connection to foster:

✓ Connective and supportive relationships to family, friends, colleagues, and pets
✓ Connection to sources of meaning, purpose, hope, refreshment, perspective

3. Culture

This acknowledges the power of our environment and the "cultures" that shape our daily lives. Evaluate how your workplace culture helps protect and support staff exposed to potentially distressing content or situations. Some important questions to consider include:

✓ What is the nature of my work – how much inherent risk of vicarious trauma does this role or occupation carry?
✓ How does my workplace and manager(s) help create a sense of safety, security, support, and comfort?

4. Coping

People who are regularly using healthy coping strategies to address and manage stress tend to have more of an emotional buffer in place and be more resilient. As such, they usually function more

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effectively over time when they are in situations that place them at risk of experiencing vicarious trauma. There are many self-care and coping strategies we know are helpful. These include:

- ✓ Exercise
- ✓ Spending time with loved ones
- ✓ Eating healthy and staying well hydrated
- ✓ Getting sufficient sleep
- ✓ Spending time in nature
- ✓ Practicing mindfulness or other relaxation strategies
- ✓ Using our creativity in ways that's unconnected to work
- ✓ Doing things that bring us joy and pleasure

Some questions for you to think about

1. What aspects of your job/role put you at risk for vicarious trauma?

2. What supports or protective factors are present in your job that help buffer or protect you from vicarious trauma?

   a. What supports or protective factors are present outside work?

3. Have you experienced vicarious trauma?

   a. If so, how did it impact you?

   b. What changes alerted you? What were your "early warning signs"?

   c. Did you experience signs of trauma, changes in your worldview and sense of meaning and purpose, or changes in your relationship? If so, which of these impacted you or distressed you most deeply?

4. Look at the over-involvement and under-involvement continuum:

   a. When you are feeling overwhelmed and stressed, which direction do you tend to go?

   b. What sort of things tend to push you into the orange margins most quickly?

5. Look at the information about the 4C's – Consciousness, Connection, Culture, and Coping.

   a. What are you naturally strongest in?

   b. Where are you likely most vulnerable?

   c. What are your go-to healthy coping strategies for dealing with stress?

   d. Where would you like to grow in this arena? For example, what is something you want to do more regularly, or a new practice you want to develop? How will you go about doing this?

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