

# Understanding and Managing Vicarious Trauma



Emergency service personnel, healthcare workers, and other public service workers frequently encounter traumatic situations that can profoundly affect their well-being. This resource provides a comprehensive guide to understanding, recognizing, and managing vicarious trauma (VT), a condition resulting from empathetic engagement with individuals who have experienced trauma.

## What is vicarious trauma?

Vicarious trauma (VT) occurs when repeated exposure to other people's traumatic experiences leads to psychological and emotional distress. It is distinct from compassion fatigue or burnout because it involves a profound shift in worldview or sense of safety, often resulting from deeply empathizing with others' trauma.

## Key differences in terminology:

- **Compassion fatigue** is emotional exhaustion with a reduced capacity to empathize due to caring for others.
- **Burnout** is workplace stress caused by overwhelming demands or a lack of resources, characterized by exhaustion, detachment, and reduced efficacy.
- **Vicarious trauma** involves a transformation in the helper's inner experience due to sustained exposure to trauma narratives, leading to changes in beliefs, values, and perceptions of safety.

## Impact of Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma can significantly influence various aspects of your life.

### In the workplace

VT may result in decreased job satisfaction and productivity. You might find yourself avoiding specific tasks or individuals or experiencing heightened hypervigilance and a constant sense of danger. These feelings can interfere with your ability to perform your duties effectively and may lead to strained relationships with colleagues.

### Social life

Socially, you might withdraw from friends and family, struggle to trust others, or lose interest in activities you once enjoyed. This withdrawal can lead to feelings of isolation and can diminish the support system that is central to coping with stress.

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## Family life

At home, VT can lead to emotional detachment from loved ones. You may experience increased irritability and have difficulties with intimacy and connection. Over time, these factors can strain family relationships and contribute to a sense of loneliness or disconnection.

## How to Recognize Vicarious Trauma

### Recognizing VT in yourself

You may notice emotional signs such as feeling numb, overly emotional, or hopeless. Cognitive symptoms include intrusive thoughts, difficulty concentrating, or developing a negative worldview. Physically, you might experience fatigue, headaches, or difficulty sleeping. Behaviorally, you may start avoiding certain people or tasks or relying more on substances to cope.

### Recognizing VT in others

In colleagues, VT might manifest as withdrawal or isolation, noticeable changes in mood or personality, decreased work performance or engagement, and heightened reactivity or irritability. Being attentive to these signs can help you support others who may be struggling.

## Building Resilience

Resilience is the ability to adapt and recover from stress. Strengthening your resilience can help you manage vicarious trauma effectively.

### Self-awareness

Reflect on your emotional and physical responses to work. Practice mindfulness to recognize triggers and understand how certain situations affect you. By being self-aware, you can take proactive steps to address stress before it becomes overwhelming.

### Professional boundaries

Set clear boundaries between your work and personal life. Avoid overextending yourself by taking on more than you can handle, and learn to say no when necessary. Establishing boundaries helps prevent work-related stress from encroaching on your personal time and well-being.

### Connection

Lean on supportive relationships with colleagues, friends, and family. Sharing experiences and feelings can alleviate stress and provide new perspectives. Consider joining peer support groups where you can connect with others who understand the unique challenges of your work.

## Wellness practices

Maintain regular exercise, eat nutritious meals, and prioritize sleep, as these are foundational practices to your well-being. Engage in hobbies or activities that bring you joy and relaxation. These practices help balance the demands of your work and contribute to overall health.

## Skill development

Practice grounding techniques such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation to help you stay present during stressful moments. Use cognitive reframing to challenge and change negative thoughts. Developing these skills enhances your ability to cope with stressors effectively.

## Tips for Immediate Support

### Pause and ground yourself

When feeling overwhelmed, take a moment to pause and ground yourself. Use techniques like the **5-4-3-2-1 method**, where you identify five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear, two you can smell, and one you can taste. This exercise brings your focus to the present moment and can reduce anxiety by diverting attention away from distressing thoughts..

### Journal your thoughts

Write about your experiences and emotions to help you process them. Journaling provides a safe space to express feelings that might be difficult to share aloud. It can also help you identify patterns or triggers, allowing you to develop strategies to manage them.

### Set limits

Recognize when you need a break and set limits accordingly. Taking regular breaks during intense workdays allows you to recharge and prevents burnout. Establish a routine that includes time for rest and self-care to maintain your effectiveness and well-being.

### Seek professional support

If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't hesitate to reach out for professional support. Contact an **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** or a trauma-informed therapist who can provide guidance and strategies tailored to your needs. Professional support can offer new coping mechanisms and a confidential space to discuss your experiences.

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## Engage with workplace resources

Access training on trauma and self-care offered by your organization. Discuss your concerns with a supervisor who can provide support or adjustments to your workload. Engaging with workplace resources can enhance your resilience and create a more supportive work environment.

## Practice ongoing self-care

Commit to regular self-check-ins to monitor your well-being. Engage with professional forums or support groups to share experiences and coping strategies. Ongoing self-care is important to maintain your resilience over time and ensures you can continue to support others effectively.

## Practical Scenarios and Strategies

### Scenario: Walking into An Uncertain Environment

#### Before the event

When anticipating an uncertain or potentially traumatic situation, take a moment to pause and take a deep breath. Mentally prepare by focusing on your role and establish clear boundaries for yourself. Remind yourself of your training and the procedures in place to handle unexpected situations. Setting intentions can help you feel more in control and prepared.

#### After the event

Reflect on the experience with a trusted colleague or supervisor. Sharing your thoughts can help process the event and provide emotional relief. Engage in a self-care activity by taking a calming walk, listening to soothing music, or practicing mindfulness exercises to help you decompress and restore balance.

### Scenario: Exposure to Abuse or Distressing Situations

#### During the event

Use grounding techniques to stay present. This might involve focusing on your breathing, silently repeating a calming phrase, or being aware of physical sensations like the feel of your feet on the ground. These strategies can help you maintain composure and effectiveness in the moment.

#### After the event

Write down your thoughts and feelings in a journal to process them. This practice can help externalize distress and make it more manageable. Seek a debriefing session with a supervisor or peer to discuss the situation, which can provide support, validation, and additional perspectives on handling similar events in the future.

## Summary of Support Options

Experiencing vicarious trauma is a natural response to challenging work and does not indicate weakness. It highlights the importance of proactive self-care and resilience-building. By taking steps to manage your well-being, you ensure that you can continue to perform your vital role effectively while prioritizing your own health.

If you're feeling the effects of VT, consider reaching out to:

- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)** for counseling and support.
- **Trauma-Informed Therapists** for personalized strategies.
- **Training Programs** to strengthen self-care skills.
- **Colleagues or Supervisors** for guidance and peer support.

Remember, support is available, and taking action is a sign of strength. Prioritizing your well-being not only benefits you but also enhances your ability to support those you serve.