

What is Vicarious Trauma?

Defining Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma occurs when you are emotionally or physically affected by someone else's painful or traumatic experiences. This can happen when you witness or hear about something upsetting, like someone's personal story of suffering or loss. Over time, these experiences can take a toll on your mental and physical health, even though you weren't directly involved in the traumatic event. (British Medical Association, 2022; Headington Institute, 2008; Clinic Community Health Centre, 2008; Office for Victims of Crime: US Department of Justice, n.d.)

If you're someone who listens to others' stories of hardship or violence—like a counsellor, healthcare provider, or first responder—you might start feeling the emotional weight of those stories, even if you're not the one going through them. It's important to recognize when this starts to affect you and take steps to care for yourself.

Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

Certain situations or factors can make you more vulnerable to vicarious trauma. Everyone is different, so what affects you may not affect someone else in the same way (Headington Institute, 2008). However, there are common things that might increase the risk, including the following:

Personal Risk Factors – These are things about you or your life that can make you more sensitive to the impact of others' trauma:

- Your personality and how you generally cope with stress
- Your personal history and any past experiences of trauma
- Your current life situation (like going through your own challenges)
- The support you have from friends, family, and community
- How you organize your work and daily life

Situational Risk Factors – These are factors related to your job or environment:

- Working closely with people in distress or who have experienced trauma
- Hearing upsetting stories or witnessing painful events regularly
- Feeling a sense of responsibility for others' well-being
- Moving from one difficult situation to the next without time to rest or process

Cultural Risk Factors – Cultural and societal factors can influence how vicarious trauma affects you. Different communities may experience or express trauma in unique ways:

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- **Cultural attitudes:** In some cultures, there may be an expectation to stay strong and resilient, even in the face of personal or collective trauma. This can make it harder to recognize when someone is struggling.
- **Expressions of distress:** People from different cultural backgrounds may express their feelings differently. For example, in some cultures, emotional distress might be shown through physical symptoms or in more indirect ways rather than through open emotional expression. Understanding these cultural differences is important in recognizing and addressing vicarious trauma.
- **Community vs. individual support:** While some people might turn to individual counselling or therapy, others may find support through family, religious communities, or cultural practices. Respecting and supporting these different approaches to coping with trauma is crucial.

Managing Vicarious Trauma

The best way to deal with vicarious trauma is to find strategies that work for you based on your individual needs, experiences, and cultural background (Headington Institute, 2008).

Here are some helpful approaches:

Reflect on Your Feelings – Take time to think about how you're feeling and whether your outlook on life has shifted. Have you become more cynical or disconnected? Noticing these changes early can help you address them before they affect you too deeply.

Develop Healthy Coping Strategies – Make self-care a priority. Rest, eat well, and do things that help you feel grounded. Healthy coping strategies can help you manage stress and prevent vicarious trauma from taking over your life.

The ABCs of Managing Vicarious Trauma

Awareness: Pay attention to your emotions and recognize when something feels off. Are you feeling more stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed than usual? Being aware of these changes can help you take action.

Balance: Make sure you're balancing work, rest, and personal time. It's easy to get caught up in work, but taking time for hobbies, relaxation, and socializing is just as important. Set boundaries to avoid burnout.

Connection: Stay connected with people you trust—whether it's friends, family, or colleagues. Talking about your experiences and feelings can help you feel supported and less isolated. In some cultures, this support may come from community or religious networks, which can be just as effective in managing emotional distress.

(Klinik Community Health Centre, 2008; Headington Institute, 2008)

Common Signs of Vicarious Trauma

Here are some signs to watch for that may indicate you're experiencing vicarious trauma:

- Difficulty managing your emotions
- Feeling numb or disconnected from your feelings
- Trouble sleeping or feeling constantly exhausted
- Low motivation or losing interest in things you used to enjoy
- Getting distracted easily or feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling hopeless or like things won't get better
- Struggling with relationships or avoiding people
- Increased irritability or anxiety
- Turning to substances like alcohol or drugs
- Physical symptoms like headaches, stomach issues, or frequent illness

If you're experiencing any of these signs, it's important to take them seriously and seek help.

(British Medical Association, 2022)

How to Take Care of Yourself

Taking time for yourself is key to managing vicarious trauma (Headington Institute, 2008). Here are some simple steps you can take:

- **Take breaks:** If you're feeling overwhelmed, take a step back from your work. Time away can help you recharge and regain perspective.
- **Get some social time:** Spend time with friends or loved ones. Socializing can help you feel supported and remind you that you're not alone. Depending on your cultural background, this might mean gathering with extended family or engaging in spiritual practices that provide comfort.
- **Seek professional help:** If needed, talking to a therapist or counselor can give you the support you need to process your feelings. If you're from a culture where professional therapy might not be the first choice, consider seeking out culturally competent professionals who understand your background and can offer the support you need.
- **Engage in physical activity:** Exercise or play sports to release stress and boost your mood.
- **Do what makes you happy:** Find joy in activities you love—whether it's a hobby, laughter, or just spending time in nature. Different cultures might have unique practices that help people relax or find happiness, like meditation, prayer, or spending time with close-knit communities.

References

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