

Recognising the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma



This is not an exhaustive list; however, it covers some of the common signs of vicarious trauma.

- Invasive thoughts of client's situation/distress
- Frustration/fear/anxiety/irritability
- Disturbed sleep/nightmares/racing thoughts
- Problems managing personal boundaries
- Taking on too great a sense of responsibility or feeling you need to overstep the boundaries of your role
- Difficulty leaving work at the end of the day/noticing you can never leave on time
- Loss of connection with self and others/loss of a sense of own identity
- Increased time alone/a sense of needing to withdraw from others
- Increased need to control events/outcomes/others
- Loss of pleasure in daily activities
- Low job satisfaction
- Feeling frustrated by or judgmental of clients
- Feeling under pressure, powerless and overwhelmed
- Not taking breaks, eating on the run
- Unable to properly refuel and regenerate
- Frequent sick days or "mental health days"
- Irritability and anger

How to protect yourself

If you find yourself experiencing these symptoms, it is important to recognise that this is not a reflection on your professional abilities but a normal response to the challenging nature of this work.

Some tips for managing symptoms

- Reach out to someone. This could be your manager, a trusted friend or colleague, a counsellor, or another support person. You could also access your employee assistance program (EAP).
- For after-hours support, the 1800RESPECT telephone and online counselling services are available 24 hours a day for professionals to discuss the personal impact of working with people who have experienced violence.



- Find a way to escape physically and/or mentally e.g. reading, days off, holidays, walks, seeing friends
- Rest – have some time with no goals e.g. taking naps, watching clouds, lying on the beach
- Play – have fun and do things that make you laugh e.g. playing with children and pets, creative activities, watching a favourite comedy

Prevention

To help prevent the symptoms of vicarious trauma and burnout from escalating or happening in the first place:

- Utilise your team and managers for regular debriefing and other support
- Find out if you have access to an employee assistance program (known as EAP) to access in times of need
- Engage in reflective practice. This can be one-on-one with a trusted friend or your manager, counsellor, or other support person (sometimes called ‘supervision’); with colleagues; or on your own e.g. by writing in a journal
- Honour your scheduled breaks and annual leave
- Evaluate your workspace to ensure it is conducive to wellbeing – enough space for you and your colleagues to have lunch together, ‘chill-out’ spaces, lots of plants/flowers/colour/light.
- Be kind and supportive to your co-workers and make sure to celebrate achievements and birthdays to take time out

Extreme beauty in nature

- 20 minute walks in Nature – being present to your immediate surroundings
- Nourishing your body with healthy food, and beverages
- Taking time to enjoy the little wonders of life. For example, watching a colourful lady bird climbing across a branch.
- Looking at a water fountain and birds splashing. It is not all bad.
- Self-Compassion is vital and acts as a protection against burn-out caused by perfectionism, negative self-talk.
- Children’s stories – reading sweet and innocent tales as a stark contrast to the violence, shame, and grief you may be faced with through your work.



Emotional self-care practice

Recognise that the activation has occurred. Emotions, feelings, or sensations that have been stirred.

This is familiar, I have been here before, I know this. This is not mine-I am not this image, impression

Allow/Accept

Bring kindness to yourself – (judgement and criticism not helpful at all)

Inquire

What other memories, thoughts and beliefs are connected to this. For example.

Beliefs such as I am not safe, I am unworthy, I am wrong.

Nurturing self-talk

Going deeply into this whole activation, we come to realise that this reactivity may be like something in our own life...memories. based on based conditions and not current.

With greater conviction, “this is not mine; this is not myself; this is not what I am. This is not what I have in my life.

R.A.I.N PROCESS WORKSHEET (Tara Brach)

RECOGNISE	Bringing attention to a feeling, sensation arising in you
ALLOW/ACCEPT	I can allow this feeling, by noticing it, and caring about this feeling – it is understandable
INVESTIGATE With Mindfulness and Kindness	Sensing the Body Emotions Memories, thoughts, beliefs,
Nurturing	Bring a nurturing self-talk toward this experience. Self-compassion rather than judging or shaming



A note on self-compassion

If you are working to help people and end up being witness to stories of abuse and violence, it is good to remember that an emotional response is also a human one. While it is important to maintain professional composure with your clients/patients, emotional responses related to abuse and violence are natural and even appropriate. Staying in contact with how you feel and having self-compassion will help you to be resilient and sustain your work.

Physical Relaxation and Exercise

Importance of regular relaxation – Vagus nerve stimulation (Breathing practice).
Yoga, Tai chi, gentle Pilates

Creative pursuits

Spending time listening or performing: Music, writing, singing songs, dancing
Salsa, fun upbeat music. Personal preferences apply.
Abstract painting – getting creative with your emotions
Journaling your experiences and state of being.
Writing exercises...

Nurture your family and friendships

Spend quality time with family and friends

Focussing on your strengths and your values

Resilience and strength grow over time and experience. Our capacity to hold the daily requirements of caring for people who are experiencing difficulties and adversity, can grow over time. Compassion is something that continues to grow over our life span.

Value alignment

“I am making a difference, I am having an impact, what I do matters to the quality of life, no matter how small that impact might seem. I don’t always know how far reaching my kindness and consideration will travel and be remembered”.

Values such as gratitude, integrity and hope can sustain our emotional wellbeing.

