

Vicarious Trauma

Self-Care for Mental Health Workers

When you see clients who have been exposed to a traumatic event or disaster, you need to be aware of the potential for 'vicarious traumatising'. Vicarious trauma causes you to question how safe you feel in the world, and with other people. It is normal to initially react strongly to the client's story, however the feelings should subside after a few weeks.

What will cause me to be vicariously traumatised?

Listening to a client's experience and feelings after witnessing or being involved in a traumatic event or disaster will expose you to images and emotions that challenge your understanding of the world. Sharing in the feelings of these stories can be emotionally draining. Your own past experiences of trauma and how you coped with those situations, as well as current life stresses and circumstances, will effect how you cope with the impact on your normal functioning.



There are a number of ways you may begin to experience symptoms of vicarious trauma, for example:

1. When you listen to your client you will be sharing the images and feelings of grief, horror, agony, rage, shame and terror about the event. Sharing the pain from these stories may cause you to question your own views and understanding of the world, humanity, and even yourself and the safety of your daily life. These questions are similar to those also being considered by your traumatised client.
2. As a mental health worker you are trained to help clients restore their happiness and well-being. This can be particularly demanding with trauma clients, and you may find it difficult to maintain professional boundaries. Despite your best intentions or commitment there may be no or little improvement for your client. This may cause you to question your understanding of yourself as a person who is able to help or provide for others.

How will I know if I'm vicariously traumatised?

Symptoms of vicarious trauma will be just as different for each person as effects are on survivors of the initial trauma. The list below can give you an indication of feelings you may experience, and that are *completely normal* when they continue for a couple of weeks. If you experience any of these signs for prolonged periods, or more intensely than you expected, or if you have any concerns, you may consider professional help to cope with these feelings.

You may experience:

- Symptoms similar to the client's, such as anxiousness, irritability, being easily startled, or not feeling safe
- Trouble getting to or staying asleep
- Thinking about the trauma or the client for much of the time
- Physiological arousal such as increased heart rate or perspiration
- Avoiding or feeling anxious about certain situations or places that relate to the traumatic event
- Difficulty relating to or being overly critical of others, particularly children. This may lead to avoiding spending time with others, and withdrawing from normal social activities or commitments
- Difficulty regulating emotions (i.e. mood swings), or emotional exhaustion
- Feeling depressed, hopeless or helpless
- Over or under eating

- Increased use of alcohol, caffeine or other drugs
- Anger at the effect of the trauma on your life
- Negative feelings, including irritation, frustration and guilt about the client
- New or worsened health issues such as bowel or stomach problems, muscle pain and headaches
- Feeling overwhelmed and wanting distance from stories of the trauma
- Poor performance at work, including avoiding clients
- Difficulty thinking clearly, concentrating, and remembering things, or having difficulty making decisions
- Loss of sense of humour, motivation or energy
- Having more accidents or making more mistakes than usual

What can I do if I feel this way?

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