

# Vicarious Trauma

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*Video transcript for SHARE.*

## Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma comes from hearing the stories from the people that we serve whether they are the witness, the victim, or the perpetrator. And just like the symptoms of trauma are completely natural, so are that symptoms of vicarious trauma and it comes from us being good at what we do that we have those compassionate, empathetic nature's. So what makes us good at our job, is also what puts us at risk. And one of the things vicarious trauma isn't is countertransference. This is not about you working out your issues with the client or over identifying, this really is about how the trauma that you hear in witness affects you in the job that you do. Vicarious trauma can occur in any myriad of professions. It doesn't matter if you work in the medical field, if you work in, um, counseling, if you work as an attorney who represents clients, judges, media, there's many different fields that can be affected by vicarious trauma. It's not about what you do, it's about who you serve and what stories are you hearing and witnessing.

Vicarious trauma can come from multiple sources in the workplace. You know obviously we listen to trauma stories and hear trauma narratives but we also view materials brought to us oftentimes we'll see photographs of violent events or they'll bring in an autopsy report or, or any different sources of material. We have also seen that people are starting to have very, very specialized caseloads because trauma informed and trauma specific services in many ways are still new. The people that are trained to do that end up getting more trauma victims than they normally would.

Another source of vicarious trauma in the workplace is the fact that we end up being very isolated because of the very nature of what we do. We have to deal with confidentially and stigma and not having those places to share it and work it out.

**And then, let's talk about some of the effects of vicarious trauma.** Just like the effects of trauma have a natural reaction so do the effects of vicarious trauma and they're very similar you see the same symptom clusters. You also see the same expanded list of symptoms, the cognitive emotional and behavioral problems, the difficulty in your relationships, and a lot of times will even see problems in, um, faith systems or spiritual beliefs that as you're doing the work and you're dealing with hearing all of these stories you start questioning what your own faith system is and whether or not it's true. Some other effects of vicarious trauma include your belief about your own sense of safety and your vulnerability and it can, that starts affecting your work performance and then you can also experience anniversary reactions. In anniversary reactions it is very important we talk about this for a second because it's not just the anniversary of the event itself, but it can be an anniversary of anything that was important between you and that person and it can be something as simple as hearing a song or a holiday that you shared.

## **So let's talk for a second about some of the signs that you might be**

**experiencing some vicarious trauma.** When you start having preoccupation with a client's traumatic events. Sometimes we start having a dread of working with certain clients and certain people that we serve. We can start having avoidance and numbing and just like with the people that we serve that can include the use of drugs and alcohol. Sometimes it changes how we do our work in that we start feeling impotent, that maybe what we're doing doesn't matter anymore, that we start losing that why, why are we doing this or, or maybe it's just that I know why I'm doing this but I don't think it's making a difference anymore. And so it changes how we view the work that we do.

You can also experience a decreased functioning in a number of areas and this is different than depression. When we talk about depression, you talk about an actual lack of interest in those areas. With vicarious trauma it's more like it is taking all the energy you have to do this, and you don't have energy left to do the other areas of your life.

**There are actually three areas of our life that can affect us.** *Individually*, what are individual factors, what are the *organizational factors*, and then what are those *life situational factors* that we're dealing with.

So let's talk about some of those **individual and life situational factors**. What is your own personal history? That includes having a trauma history. What is currently happening in your life or in the lives of those that you love? What are your personal strengths and resiliency factors and how do you take care of yourself to build those strengths and resiliency factors.

So now let's talk about some of the **organizational factors** that influence vicarious trauma. You know, first and foremost, are you in a trauma informed system, have, does your agency look at things like parallel processing and is that trauma lens incorporated into everything that you do from your policies and procedures to how staff are supported, even including your employee assistance programs? Are you getting in service trainings on vicarious trauma and self-care? Do you have formal and informal support groups? And all of those things work together to either increase or decrease our vulnerability to vicarious trauma within our work places.

So now that we know our vulnerabilities, let's look at how we prevent vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress in the work that we do. There are four areas that influence that and there are professional strategies, agency strategies, our personal strategies, and the just general coping strategies. So let's talk a moment about the personal and the general coping strategies and it's very simple.

**You just have to know your ABC's:** Awareness, Balance and Connection. Awareness is just being attuned to your needs. Knowing your limits, your resources, and those personal strengths and weaknesses and areas of vulnerability that you have. Balance of course is the thing that everyone likes to talk about and very few of us ever achieve but

that we do need to work towards! And then connection: to yourself, to others, and to something larger than who you are.

**So let's start with A.** A is for Awareness and there are many, many tools out there you can use in your organization and personally about creating awareness and where you are dealing with vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue or burn out or any of those things, but we're going to have just a series of questions that we quickly want you to go through and just kind of do that mental self-check in on, where am I with these:

- *Am I enjoying work?*
- *How do I feel when I arrive at work?*
- *How do I feel when I leave work?*
- *Do I dream about work related things?*
- *Do I over identify or distance myself from certain clients?*
- *Have I noticed any changes in my health?*
- *Have there been any changes in how I spend my leisure time?*
- *Am I drinking, smoking, over eating, under eating, not getting enough sleep?*
- *Is my body showing signs of stress?*
- *Has my sense of self changed?*
- *Do I feel worthwhile?*
- *How am I managing my stress?*
- *Am I under stress?*
- *Am I making good life decisions?*
- *Should I be making big decisions right now?*
- *Do I like or enjoy being with others?*
- *Do I spend meaningful time with my family?*
- *Do I feel close to others?*
- *Do I share myself less or more?*
- *Do I feel understood by others?*
- *Have I changed the way I think and feel about others who are close to me?*

**So then going to B.** B is for Balance. And when we talk about B, what we're, even though it's for Balance, what we're really talking about is safe coping skills and self-care. And how do we incorporate those in our lives, how do we take care of ourselves so that we are doing the best that we can in the work that we do.

**And C is for Connection,** having that connection to yourself, to others and to something larger than you. And when we talk about staying connected, there's some different ways to do that. A couple we like to use is remembering your WHY. What is your big picture? What is your cause? Why is it that you are doing the work that you do? So many times especially when dealing with the symptoms of vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress, we start having that diminished sense of purpose and that feeling of impenitence, and that I'm not doing the job that I want to do. Sometimes we have to go back to the WHY of what we are doing.

A couple other techniques for finding that connection, is to take moments to celebrate victories. And a lot of times we get so busy doing the work that we do or all we see is the lack of resources or, or the challenges either we or the people we're serving are facing, that we don't take the time to stop and celebrate those victories as there happening. And they don't have to be huge. Sometimes it's, it's the little ones that actually make the biggest differences. So creating that culture of celebration both for yourself and within your agency can totally change how you stay connected.

A third strategy with staying connected is what we refer to as landmarks. Sometimes it's not the victories that propel us forward. Sometimes it's the moments that the bad, scary, or ugly happen or that there is a loss, or that something challenging occurs. And sometimes it's those landmarks that actually take us to the next level in the work that we're doing. And so it's really important that we not just celebrate victories but we understand what those landmarks are and how good can come out of them so that when we are in a challenging moment it helps us have that hope and optimism that not only are we going to get past this but we can create something better.

In addition to our ABC's of awareness, balance and connection, it's also important that we have a personal plan. So many times with the people we serve we have them come up with self-care plans and safety plans, but then we aren't doing it ourselves. Many people have families and when they get home they know that as they walk in that door their going to have to switch to mom or dad or grandma or whatever role they may have. So it may be something as simple as going on a day that I have something I need to deal with. I'll have a 30 or 40 minute break between home and work that I can just drive around and have time to process it out. But if we don't have that plan and we don't know how to take care of ourselves, we aren't going to do as well as we could so that's why we really, really emphasis the importance of having your own self-care and safety plan.