

# ABCs Of Vicarious Trauma

## What is Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma is a negative reaction that occurs after exposure to someone else's trauma and may include physical, psychological and social impacts. This exposure can involve witnessing or hearing about someone's traumatic experience (British Medical Association, 2022) (Headington Institute, 2008) (Klinik Community Health Centre, 2008) (Office for Victims of Crime: US Department of Justice, n.d.).

One must recognize when trauma is impacting them and then take the necessary steps to address it.

## The ABCs

### Awareness:

Develop an understanding of your needs, limits, and emotions and monitor how you feel or respond to certain situations; do you know why you might feel a certain way? Learn where to obtain resources that provide support.

### Balance:

Maintain a balance among activities, especially work, play and rest. Practice self-care, take care of your body, eat healthy food, and set boundaries. Take steps to reduce stress.

### Connection:

Connect with yourself, to others and something larger. Look for a place to talk about what you are experiencing; this can help you feel validated and offer hope.

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

## Common Signs of Vicarious Trauma

- difficulty managing emotions
- feeling numb or shut down
- sleep disturbances
- low motivation
- being easily distracted
- feeling hopeless
- relationship problems
- avoiding work or colleagues
- feeling vulnerable or worrying excessively increased irritability
- substance use
- loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- physical problems – aches, pains, shortness of breath, more frequent illness

(British Medical Association, 2022)

## Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

Risk factors are events or situations that make you more vulnerable to experiencing vicarious trauma. Everyone is unique, so what contributes to your experience of vicarious trauma may be different for someone else. Vicarious trauma is dynamic, and the factors that contribute to it may change from day to day. Anything that gets in the way of fulfilling your responsibilities to your occupation or the trauma survivors you help can contribute to vicarious trauma (Headington Institute, 2008).

### Personal Risk Factors

- your personality
- how you cope
- your personal history
- your current life circumstances
- social and spiritual support
- how you structure your work

### Situational Risk Factors

- working directly with people in need
- hearing distressing stories and/or witnessing painful events
- being in a position of responsibility and/or feeling responsible for people
- moving from one challenging situation to the next without adequate rest and processing

### Cultural Risk Factors

- societal and cultural attitudes of intolerance can increase the risk of experiencing vicarious trauma
- a lack of understanding that different cultures express distress and how they receive or perceive support can increase the risk
- societal and/or organizational culture that characterizes helping professionals as resilient and unyielding with a lack of focus on the personal needs of professionals

## Managing Vicarious Trauma

The tools that will help you address your vicarious trauma are unique to you and reflect your needs, experiences, interests, resources, culture, and values (Headington Institute, 2008).

### Monitor Your Beliefs

- Have the ways in which you view yourself and/or the world changed?
- Has your sense of commitment to life responsibilities changed?

### Develop Coping Strategies

- get some rest

- take time off work or other obligations
- socialize
- seek professional support
- play sports or stay physically active
- laugh more and do the things you enjoy

## References

British Medical Association. (2022, January 17). *Vicarious trauma: signs and strategies for coping*. Retrieved from British Medical Association: <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/your-wellbeing/vicarious-trauma/vicarious-trauma-signs-and-strategies-for-coping>

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