



Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma

“To heal, we must resist. To resist, we must heal.”



What is Vicarious Trauma?

- Vicarious trauma is the process of change that happens because you care about other people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them. Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being.
- Vicarious trauma is cumulative. It is what happens when witnessing cruelty and hearing story after story of devastation day after day, year after year.
- This process of change is ongoing. Your experiences of vicarious trauma are continuously being influenced by your life experiences.

What are some ways that you have changed over time because of your work?



What is Vicarious Trauma

- Vicarious trauma happens because you care, you empathize with people who are hurting.
- You have empathy – the ability to relate to and understand another person’s experiences, reactions, and feelings.
- When you care about people who have endured terrible things, you bring their grief, fear, anger, and despair into your awareness and experience and feel it along with them in some way.

What are some ways that caring about people who have been hurt affects you?



What is Vicarious Trauma

- Vicarious trauma occurs because you feel committed or responsible to help.
- This is a good thing, but can lead to very high (and sometimes unrealistic) expectations of yourself, others, and the results you want to see.
- Your commitment and sense of responsibility can eventually lead to feeling burdened, overwhelmed, and hopeless in the face of great need and suffering, as well as cause you to over-extend yourself beyond what is reasonable for your own well-being or the best long-term interests of those you are attempting to assist.

How does your sense of commitment and responsibility to your work help you? How might it hurt you?




What is Vicarious Trauma

- Vicarious trauma is the result of opening up your heart and mind to the worst in human experiences
- A key component of vicarious trauma is changes in spirituality. Vicarious trauma can deeply impact the way you see the world and your deepest sense of meaning and hope.

What is a way your work has had a positive influence on the way you see the world or your sense of meaning and hope? What is a way it has had a negative influence?

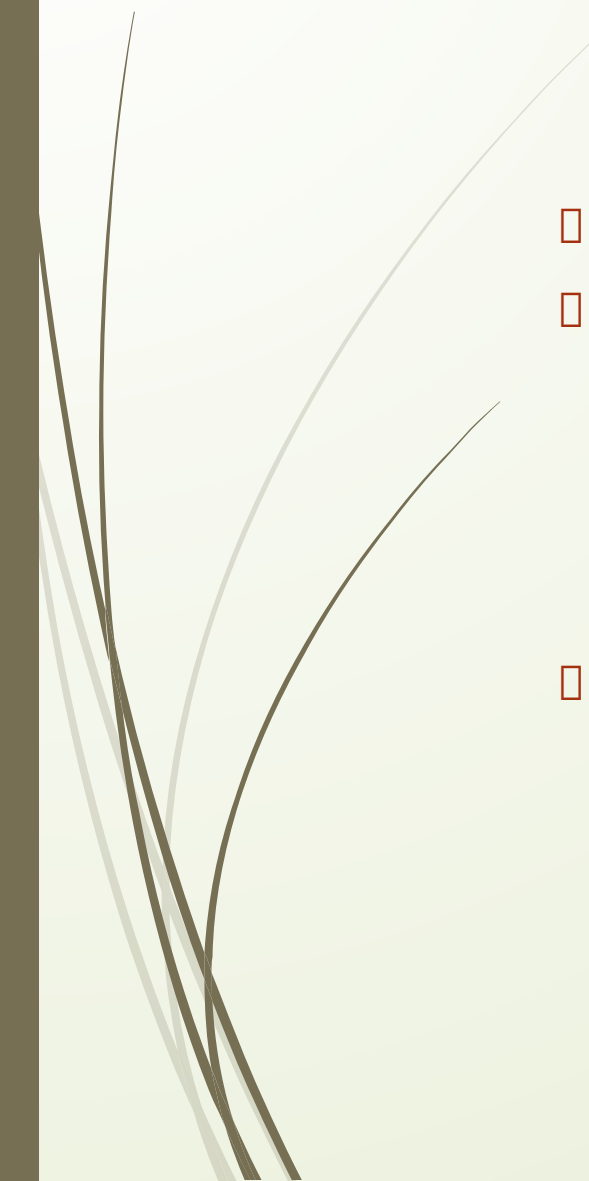


Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

- Risk factors are what makes you more vulnerable to experiencing vicarious trauma or experiencing it more severely.
 - Understanding what your personal risk factors are will make it easier to identify what might help you prevent or address vicarious trauma.
 - Anything in you, the situation, or the cultural context that gets in the way of fulfilling your responsibility or commitment to assist those affected can contribute to your vicarious trauma.
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Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

- Personality, coping styles, and personal history impact vicarious trauma.
 - For example, vicarious trauma may be more problematic for people who tend to avoid difficult problems or feelings, blame others for their difficulties, or withdraw from others when things get hard. On the other hand, people who are able to ask for support, who try to understand themselves and others, and who actively try to solve their problems may be less susceptible to severe vicarious trauma.
 - Those who have experienced trauma themselves may identify more closely with particular types of pain or loss others have experienced and may be more vulnerable to vicarious trauma.
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Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

- ❑ Current life circumstances, such as a family member's illness, stress about money, etc. can accumulate and make it more challenging to take care of yourself while also working effectively and compassionately with those you are assisting.
- ❑ Lack of good social support puts you at increased risk for vicarious trauma.
- ❑ You are more likely to find vicarious trauma problematic if you don't have a connection with a source of meaning, purpose, hope, and vision. Without this, you may not have a context for comprehending the terrible events you encounter.
- ❑ Unsustainable work-life boundaries and unrealistic expectations about work can also contribute to more problematic vicarious trauma.



Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

What are three individual risk factors that may be placing you at increased risk of experiencing vicarious trauma?

What are three things in your life related to you as an individual that you feel help protect you from vicarious trauma?



Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

- Working directly with more people in need and hearing more distressing stories and/or witnessing more distressing events impacts your risk.
- Being in a position in which you feel responsible for more people while also feeling as if you do not have control or resources you need leads to more problematic vicarious trauma.
- Working longer engagements or moving from one crisis to another without adequate rest and processing in between also leads to worse vicarious trauma.
- Working or volunteering for organizations that are hierarchical, lack open communication, and fail to create a supportive organizational culture contribute to vicarious trauma as well.



Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma

- Mistrust, sense of distance, and lack of gratitude as a result of trauma among traumatized survivors can be frustrating and bewildering leading to increased severity of vicarious trauma.

What situational risk factors may be placing you at risk of vicarious trauma?

What situational protective factors may be helping protect you from vicarious trauma?



Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma


- Cultural attitudes of intolerance increase risk of experiencing vicarious trauma.
- Not understanding cross-culture differences in expressing distress and extending and receiving assistance can increase risk of vicarious trauma.
- Organizational or movement culture of machismo, “toughing it out”, risk-taking, and denial of needs contribute to more severe vicarious trauma.

What cultural risk factors may currently be placing you at increased risk of experiencing vicarious trauma?

What cultural protective factors may be helping protect you from vicarious trauma?



Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

- Difficulty managing your emotions.
 - Difficulty feeling okay about yourself.
 - Difficulty making good decisions.
 - Problems setting boundaries and separating work from personal life.
 - Problems in relationships.
 - Aches, pains, or illnesses.
 - Accidents.
 - Difficulty feeling connected to what's going on around/inside you.
 - Loss of meaning and hope.
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Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

- ❑ Changes in worldview or frame of reference such as change in spirituality, changes in identities/roles, changes in beliefs about safety, control, trust, self-esteem, and intimacy.
- ❑ Hyperarousal
- ❑ Sleep difficulties
- ❑ Feeling numb
- ❑ Feeling unable to tolerate strong emotions
- ❑ Increased sensitivity to violence
- ❑ Cynicism
- ❑ Loss of idealism/despair



Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

- Guilt regarding your own survival or pleasure
- Anger or Fear
- Disgust
- Feeling disconnected with loved ones even when communicating with them
- Decreased interest in activities that used to bring enjoyment or relaxation
- Irritability, agitation, impatience, or moodiness
- Increased dependencies or addictions
- Impulsivity

What are some signs that you have experienced? Think back, about what may be the first signals that warn you that you're beginning to struggle with vicarious trauma?



Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

- Your struggles with vicarious trauma can have a serious impact on those close to you as well.
- Withdrawal, overusing alcohol, lack of sleep, diminished sexuality, over-protectiveness, loss of compassion or hope all influence the way you interact with those you love.

Consider asking people you are close to “What have you noticed about the way I behave and appear to feel when I’m under pressure?” or a similar question.



Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

- ❑ Making decisions without adequate reflection
- ❑ Not fulfilling commitments
- ❑ Blaming others instead of seeking understanding and productive collaboration
- ❑ Devaluing and/or ridiculing people who are receiving assistance or others involved
- ❑ Infecting colleagues with cynicism, depression, and lack of motivation
- ❑ These symptoms can undermine the functioning of the organization and the quality of the assistance being provided.



Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Coping with vicarious trauma means identifying strategies that help prevent vicarious trauma from becoming severe and help manage vicarious trauma when it is problematic.
- Good coping strategies help you take care of yourself – especially escape, rest, and play.
- Examples include: books, films, video games, talking to friends about things other than work, taking time off, lying on the grass, sipping tea, taking a nap, getting a massage, being physically active, sharing jokes, being creative.

What are activities you enjoy doing that help you cope with vicarious trauma? How do these activities counteract your risk factors or address your signs of vicarious trauma?



Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Transforming vicarious trauma means identifying ways to nurture a sense of meaning and hope.
- Examples include: reminding yourself the importance of your work, staying connected with friends and family, paying attention to the “little things”, partaking in traditions or rituals, reading, writing, prayer or meditation, challenging your cynical beliefs, learning, journaling, being creative or artistic.

What are activities you enjoy doing that could help you transform vicarious trauma on a deeper level?



Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Three important themes in an effective action plan for vicarious trauma are awareness, balance, and connection.
- Understanding your responses and what might be contributing to them can lead you to a sense of what you need, and how to change what's happening or manage your own responses so that things don't get worse.
- Being aware of what you're doing while you're doing it, deliberately keeping your mind and body in the same place may help prevent or manage vicarious trauma.

Reflect on how you are feeling (physically, emotionally, spiritually). Are you aware of anything out of the ordinary? If so, what might that be related to?



Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Balancing your personal needs with the needs of the work.
- Balancing really demanding work with less challenging work.
- Make sure each work day includes breaks for meals/physical activity/rest.
- Spend some time with people you don't have to take care of, or better yet, who take care of you.
- Understand that exhausted workers can do more harm than good by making mistakes

Fill in the blanks: “I sometimes find it difficult to balance _____ with _____.”



Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Maintaining nurturing relationships and meaningful contact with others is one of the best things we can do to address vicarious trauma.
- Being connected with what nurtures and anchors you whether that is nature, religion, or another source of meaning, awe, joy, wonder, purpose, and hope is very important as well.

What are some communities that help you feel nurtured, supported, and connected?



Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- How you think about your work plays a big role in keeping you balanced, healthy, and prevent or manage vicarious trauma.
- Why do you do this work?
- How does the work you do fit into the larger picture/mission of the organization or movement?
- How do you measure success in your work?
- What can you control in your work?
- What are the costs and rewards of this work and how are you personally changing?
- In the midst of demanding situations, do you notice any examples of determination, ingenuity, compassion, resilience, heroism, etc. ?



Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- While at work: change some of the things that bother you, intentionally make choices, try something different, write about your experiences, find ways to retain or regain perspective during the day, share resources strategies, and stories with colleagues to bridge the sense of isolation.

What healthy working habits can you think of that may help you lessen or manage vicarious trauma?



Addressing Vicarious Trauma

- Your organization ought to help you address vicarious trauma as well through sufficient orientation and training, information about the hazards of this work and effective self-care strategies, and access to counseling support as needed.
- Other ways organizations can assist are developing peer-support networks, social activities, working in teams, sharing decision-making power, and allowing for and encouraging breaks.

What does your organization do well to support you and help reduce the risk of vicarious trauma? What could it do better?



Reference

- The training this powerpoint is based on, and more, can be found at:
<http://www.headington-institute.org/>