

Caring Safely®

Recovering from Vicarious Trauma

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Vicarious Trauma

If you have regular exposure to trauma, either through witnessing trauma or hearing graphic details, you may experience episodes of vicarious trauma.

- **Vicarious trauma** is when you have not experienced a trauma yourself, but you catch traumatic stress from witnessing and/or hearing stories of traumatic events. A person who experiences vicarious trauma may have symptoms similar to Acute Stress Disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which can result in a shift in your world view and sense of meaning.
- **Example of Vicarious Trauma:** A person who works in the Urgent Care may see a lot of patients in critical conditions from car accidents. This person may begin to think about car accidents while driving, may begin to feel agitation/anxious while going through intersections, may become very protective of their loved ones when they are driving and may begin to avoid driving.

Peer accounts of Vicarious Trauma

“There are things that you hear that you actually go like, how can that happen to someone? How can you survive? How can you cope and keep living? You see the depression or you see the sadness, but the person keeps going and you wonder how.”

“Not dreams, but I get flashbacks.... Sometimes I am at home and I just have this [bad feeling] come back.”

“I would leave a client after hearing their story and just burst into tears.”

“One client was talking about feeling blood on his hands and I could see the blood, in my mind, on his hands.”

Acute Stress Disorder

A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violation in one (or more) of the following ways:

1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred others.
3. Learning that the events occurred to a close family member or close friend
- 4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)**

Symptoms: Intrusion, Mood, Dissociation, Avoidance, Arousal – **beginning or worsening after the event(s) occurred.**

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- Events that include fear, helplessness or horror
- Events similar to acute stress disorder
- Presence of intrusion symptoms that **began after the traumatic event occurred.**
- Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with traumatic event(s) that **began after event occurred.**
- Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with traumatic event.
- Marked alterations in arousal
- May or may not include dissociative symptoms (depersonalization, derealization)

PTSD can be accompanied by depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse disorders

Arousal/Avoidance

Arousal	Avoidance
Fear/Anxiety/Irritability	Depression/Hopelessness
Sleep disturbances, Appetite changes	Procrastination/Dread/Isolation
Impulsive/Compulsive Behavior	Blame/Relational Problems
Poor concentration/Obsessive thoughts	Less Self-Care
Immune problems	Rumination

Signs of Acute Stress

Following an episode of vicarious trauma, people may begin to:

- Shield themselves from any stimuli that serve as reminders to the incident
- Avoid activities which they used to find pleasurable
- Experience cognitive deficits such as reduced concentration
- Feel emotionally detached from others.
- Feel shame, guilt, anger and/or self-doubt
- Can lead to poorer student/client/patient care and increase in staff turnover

Signs of Vicarious Trauma

In 1996, Sakvitne and Pearlman published the book *Transforming the pain: A workbook on vicarious traumatization*. This book provided an extensive list of self-reflective questions to explore signs of vicarious trauma. This handout is a brief adaptation of a those questions and invites you to reflect what changes have you noticed in the following areas:

- Beliefs, identity and purpose
- Resilience and self-regulation
- Intrusive Imagery and physiological experiences

Personalize and Integrate on Handout

Vicarious Trauma Recovery Process

- Label the experience of vicarious trauma
- Do something to trigger the relaxation response
- Deep Breathing/PMR/Yoga/Trauma Release Exercise
- Move your body – sweat out the stress hormones!
- Get fresh air
- Connect with loved ones
- Do something that is nourishing
- Consult with peers/supervisor if necessary (team care)
- Be involved in ensuring that the issue(s) in the process that led any errors are addressed in order to decrease the likelihood that such an event will recur.

Vicarious Trauma Recovery Process

Finish the story in your mind:

- If you witnessed or heard graphic details of a traumatic event that triggered your stress response or intense emotions, your mind will often repeatedly review the details of the trauma, making up the details if you didn't directly witness it.
- Your mind will not think about how your experience ended or what happened afterwards.
- It's important to also review the end of the event and your experience after the event.
- Think about what happened after the event, how your shift ended, how you handled any administrative tasks, any debrief/consultations, any supports, your commute home and how you ended your day. Reflect on your resilience as you proceeded with all those steps during and after the event.

Grief and Sadness

We can feel grief or sadness for the pain and suffering we bear witness to:

- Grief is an experience that includes mental, emotional and behavioral experiences related to a loss or change in circumstances with someone or something we value. Grief isn't only for the loss of a loved one. There are many losses we may experience, or witness, that cause grief, such as loss of trust, loss/change of ability, loss of relationships/community.
- Sadness is part of the normal human range of emotions. It often comes with a difficult, hurtful or challenging experience. It is emotional pain that can include loss, helplessness or disappointment.
- You will likely feel grief or sadness throughout your time helping or caring for other humans, animals or the planet, which can happen both personally and professionally.
- Using strategies such as Surfing Your Emotions and Journaling with Relaxation can help you process grief and sadness.

Values based approach to grief and sadness

- Sadness and grief usually include unpleasant thoughts, physical sensations and emotions. And since most humans, including caring people such as yourself, dislike unpleasant experiences, there is a tendency to try to numb or avoid those experiences.
- Think of the ACT paradigm and the internal experiences in the bottom left quadrant that come with grief and sadness. There is a tendency to move into the top left quadrant to cope, with actions that help to numb pain, but also take us away from our values.
- By choosing to label sadness or grief and be present with it, by surfing your emotions (and journaling with relaxation if you are feeling distress), you're not avoiding or numbing your experience. This will help you process the emotion and bring down the distress so you can then intentionally choose to move forward with a value based action in the top right quadrant.

Surfing Your Emotions

- An important part of building resilience is learning how to recognize and ride the rise and fall of your emotions.
- All emotions come with thoughts and physical sensations, although we often don't connect all three to recognize our full experience.
- Different emotions will present with different experiences and different emotions will include different thinking patterns and different physical sensations.
- All emotions come and go like waves ranging from small waves to intense waves that can knock you over. Learning how to ride the waves of your emotions will help you build resilience.

Personalize and Integrate with Handout

Journaling and Relaxation

- Journaling can be a very helpful tool for processing thoughts and emotions.
- Overtime, it can help you learn patterns about yourself to see what you do that is nourishing and helpful or what you do that is draining and less helpful.
- Depending on the subject that you are journaling about, your stress response could be triggered and it could result in writing numerous pages while your body is stressed.
- This strategy combines the power of writing, and calming the body, to help bring down physiological arousal and process your emotion in a shorter period of time without triggering the stress response.
- Slow down thoughts with writing. Slow down body with deep breathing

Personalize and Integrate with Handout