

Why Vicarious Traumatization is Different, Invisible and Important to Know About

Below are some of the ways that people in helping roles can be impacted by their work. While there is overlap between the symptoms of different types of impact, these labels are also frequently *mistakenly* used to describe someone experiencing Vicarious Traumatization (VT), thereby overlooking the insidious, deeper, longer-term changes which VT brings about. VT is why so many leave a job they love, feeling it was somehow their 'fault' or 'weakness'.

Without knowing the root cause of something, we cannot be effective in addressing it. VT arises over time, from the repeated empathic connection with other people's trauma and suffering. Recognising and mitigating the *distinct invisible risk of VT* to nursing staff is necessary to enabling people to stay well and keep doing the job they love: a *win-win for all*.

Burnout can be experienced by *anyone* who is doing too much for too long. It results from chronic workplace stress and can impact us in various ways, such as:

1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion.
2. Mental distancing from one's job, or negative feelings or cynicism about it.
3. Reduced professional efficacy.

Moral Injury is a term used in medicine, psychology, and mental health to describe the psychological, emotional, and spiritual distress that arises when a person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent actions that conflict with their deeply held moral or ethical beliefs. For example, when workplace factors (often beyond our control) prevent us from achieving the best outcomes for those in our care.

Secondary Trauma is the stress reaction and emotional impact experienced by an individual from witnessing (seeing, hearing, reading about) a traumatic incident experienced by another.

Compassion Fatigue is a form of secondary traumatic stress (STS) that results from prolonged exposure to the suffering of others, often leading to a kind of emotional exhaustion, emotional numbing and a *reduced capacity for empathy*.

Vicarious Traumatization (VT) is the invisible process by which a Helper's nervous system can become impacted over time, from the repeated empathic connection with other people's trauma. This is due to the neurological basis of empathy (Siegel, 2011).

'Vicarious trauma (VT) 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 wellbeing.'

Dr Laurie Anne Pearlman and Lisa McCann, Headington Institute (2008)

VT symptoms are recognisably akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including:

- Hypervigilance and increased anxiety
- Intrusive thoughts or images
- Emotional numbing
- Avoidance behaviours
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- An altered worldview, including increased cynicism or decreased trust

VT is an invisible risk to anyone who repeatedly connects empathically with other people's trauma – whether directly on the front line, or indirectly e.g., Care Quality Commission staff reading serious case reviews or human rights lawyers reading accounts of atrocities.

Recognising VT is a vital first step in being able to build in the practices and activities for looking after ourselves, which help to build greater resilience in the nervous system thereby mitigating the impact of VT.

So, what can people do about the risk of VT?

- Increase our awareness of what VT looks like so that it is recognised by everyone, enabling staff to spot it early in themselves and in colleagues; and managers and organisations to respond with compassion and provide the relevant support pathways for recovery from what is, in fact, a work-place injury.
- Re-frame the value of staff self-care: by doing/supporting the things which research shows make a real difference to building staff resilience to VT. Collectively prioritising these activities builds stronger nervous systems - *like putting in the fitness training hours to build enough stamina to be able to run a marathon!*

As an introduction to VT, listen to a Macmillan two-part Podcast (2024) on **Spotify** called '**The weight of empathy: understanding vicarious trauma in cancer care**'

Part 1 - <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3P1wXJqC6pwtG9OhJamkIP>

Part 2 - <https://open.spotify.com/episode/00noUu1JVX2QNH0CFNGqhz>

Also available on the **Apple Podcasts App**:

Part 1 - <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-weight-of-empathy-understanding-vicarious-trauma/id1722072416?i=1000654113413>

Part 2 - <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-weight-of-empathy-understanding-vicarious-trauma/id1722072416?i=1000657865388>

To learn more about VT and what you can do about it, you can also visit the website:

www.vicarious-traumatisation.com

www.vicarious-traumatisation.com