

What is Vicarious Trauma... and Do You Have It?

Also referred to as compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma is a major contributor to chronic stress, especially for those who work with populations at a higher risk of trauma, such as social workers, healthcare workers, therapists, educators, and emergency workers.

Vicarious trauma, aka compassion fatigue, is one of the most visible signs of trauma in our workforce. Compassion fatigue, aptly named, is a sort of tiredness and apathy that comes from expending our compassion on others' trauma.

“Secondary trauma happens when we hear of another person's traumatic experience, whether through a personal retelling or some kind of report. Vicarious trauma occurs when

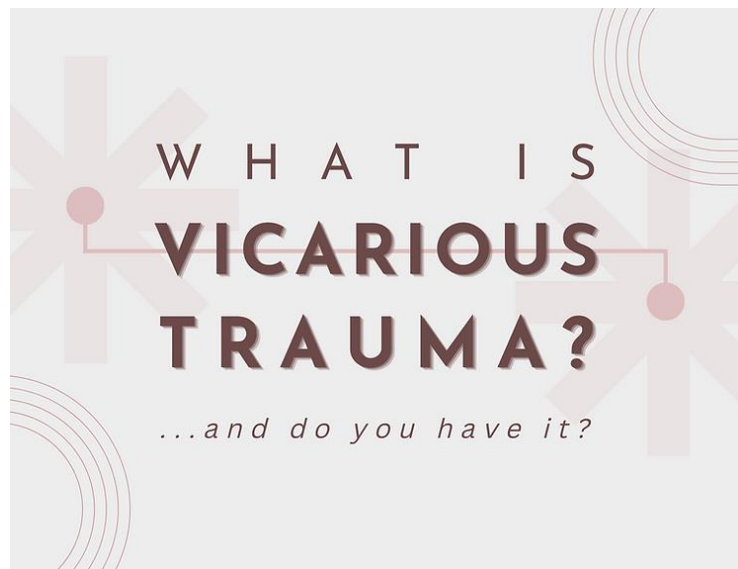
someone experiences prolonged exposure to others' suffering. Vicarious trauma often creates a shift in someone's worldview and attitude, as it can amplify feelings of hopelessness and pessimism.

Although certain professions experience a greater risk of vicarious trauma, such as social workers and clinicians, workers in any industry and sector can experience vicarious trauma.

Vicarious trauma is also referred to as compassion fatigue. Referring to vicarious trauma as compassion fatigue can be a helpful way to remember that we can become emotionally and physically drained from helping others. Our compassion can take a toll on our well-being.”

Compassion fatigue can be defined as “a shift in a person's attitude and worldview as the result of experiencing prolonged exposure to others' suffering. Compassion fatigue can be characterized by indifference, apathy, pessimism, or hopelessness. Also referred to as vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue is most common among healthcare and social workers” (Chefalo, 2023).


So, if you're experiencing burnout or depression, consider how vicarious trauma may be affecting your worldview.



Do you suffer from compassion fatigue?

If you work in human services, the chances that you suffer from compassion fatigue are high—but that doesn't mean vicarious trauma is off the table if you work in a different sector.

Compassion fatigue has an observable impact on those it affects, and the symptoms of compassion fatigue often mirror those of PTSD (Osofsky, 2008; Figley, 1995). Here are some common signs that you're struggling with compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma.



We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren't sick, but we aren't ourselves

- C. Figley, 1995

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Bad news doesn't carry as much emotional weight as it used to

Prolonged exposure to others' suffering often makes us numb to others' suffering. That's not to say that we don't care. Compassion fatigue is the direct result of caring for others.

However, compassion fatigue develops as a way for our brains to cope with that repeated exposure to others' suffering. So, the bad news we hear online or at work tends to sting less over time until we can't feel anything at all.

You often feel apathetic, numb, or neutral

This apathy of vicarious trauma can spill out into our lives so that those feelings of numbness encroach on every aspect of daily life. Compassion fatigue can also make it difficult to enjoy the truly joyous moments in life.

But you also struggle with feelings of guilt, anger, or helplessness

That's not to say that those with compassion fatigue never feel anything. It is possible to experience the full range of emotions while struggling with compassion fatigue. But, those with compassion fatigue do tend to struggle with feelings of guilt, anger, sadness, and helplessness more than those without vicarious trauma or PTSD.

Your outlook on the world is largely negative

Like PTSD, compassion fatigue impacts our cognitive thinking skills. Those with vicarious trauma often struggle with rigid thinking, perfectionism, and a preoccupation with trauma, which all contribute to an outlook on the world and other people that is largely negative.

People with compassion fatigue may assume the worst in others, struggle with their sense of self-worth, or experience noticeable difficulty accepting things as they are while also believing that things won't change for the better.

You struggle to get quality sleep

All forms of trauma, including vicarious trauma, have physiological impacts in addition to psychological and emotional impacts. One of the most common signs of trauma is trouble sleeping, and this symptom can be made worse by other impacts of trauma, such as anxiety, appetite changes, social withdrawal, chronic pain, and lowered immunity.

You work with children or adults with high rates of trauma

Being exposed to others' trauma on a daily basis is another telltale sign that you experience compassion fatigue. But it's important to note that anyone can experience compassion fatigue.

When we consider racism, sexism, financial insecurity, the lack of access to healthcare, and other forms of systemic violence, it's easy to see how pervasive and overwhelming the exposure to others' stress can be, regardless of the industry you work in.

Compassion Fatigue and Systemic Violence

If you search online to learn more about compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, the context is largely that of trauma-informed care, which operates within the healthcare system. While these models can be adjusted and modified to apply to any sector, it's important we provide varied perspectives on vicarious trauma.

I urge you to consider how compassion fatigue is related to and contributes to systemic oppression and institutionalized violence.

For example, if you consider or discuss systemic violence on a daily basis, how does that impact you? For some, thinking about these topics is a choice. For others, it is not. For many of us, it is a necessary part of our jobs. Healthcare workers and researchers must consider the social determinants of health. Educators may seek awareness of trauma to improve their classroom safety.

This is all to say that compassion fatigue is more common than you may think—and it's important to consider this aspect of trauma seriously in your life and the lives of those who surround you.

Final Thoughts: Healing the Trauma of Compassion Fatigue

Trauma healing is a journey that never truly ends. If you're looking for actionable solutions that can help you begin to heal from trauma, consider these quick tips:

- Work toward understanding that the pain you experience is not wrong.

- Exercise often and eat well because these lifestyle choices greatly impact your mental health.
- Prioritize getting enough sleep.
- Take breaks when you need them, and take extended time off to rest.
- Develop interests outside of work.
- Identify what's important to you. Consider your personal values and where you derive meaning.
- Resist reenactments where you take on the role of the persecutor, rescuer, or victim.
- Recognize that inner change may have a greater impact than external changes, depending on the situation.
- Pay attention to your needs and wants and prioritize your well-being.

The journey of healing cannot be summarized into a neat, bulleted list. It can't even be contained in a single course. But, we do offer a 10-week introductory course to trauma-informed practices, which will give you the language, knowledge, and skills you need to get started with the trauma-informed approach in your own life and work.

Resources

- ACF (The Administration for Children & Families). "Secondary Traumatic Stress." Web. Accessed 2023.
- Chefalo, Shenandoah. "The Complete Guide to Trauma-Informed Implementation." Web. 2023.
- Figley, C. (1995). *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.
- Osofsky, J.D. et al. (2008). How to maintain emotional health when working with trauma. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 59 (4), 91-102.