

Tip sheet

Vicarious trauma in policy or research roles

Vicarious trauma is an occupational hazard that is largely unrecognised and unaddressed. Those in roles with regular exposure to graphic content can become secondary witnesses to trauma (either visually or by hearing about it after the fact).

This persistent proximity to trauma can leave the person feeling numb and emotionally 'cut off' from the enormity of the content. The effects of this are called vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue or compassion stress.

'Turning off' your job when you go home can be difficult, especially when being confronted with those same issues in day to day life. Eliminating or isolating this hazard may not be possible either, but minimising the risk should be a given in any organisation.



Responding to vicarious trauma

Although vicarious trauma is often referred to as the 'cost of caring', it's not inevitable. Even small changes made now can gradually make a big difference.

Rituals to leave it at the door

Having ways to leave work behind each day is important to decompress. This might be letting it go as you travel home, going for a walk or taking an item of clothing off.

Acknowledge the feelings

Take time each day to pause and think about how you're feeling, acknowledging that these are valid rather than trying to shut them away.

Refocus on yourself

Think about and attend to your own needs so you're not 'running on empty' – you can't sustain caring for others if you're not caring for yourself. Think about what you can change; there will always be something.

Reconnect to what matters

This includes what you enjoy most – people, things, places, activities, even small things.

Move your body and discharge some energy

Stress and tension build up in the body and mind over time and become a habit – walk, dance, climb the stairs, sing, laugh or cry.

Get out in nature

Even if it's just for five minutes, you may find it restorative and calming. Try a screensaver if you can't get outside.

Talk about it

Speak to someone you trust about your thoughts and feelings – a good friend, someone at work, a supervisor or a counsellor depending on how much this impacts your daily life. Sometimes a break or a shift in the work can be useful.

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