

Vicarious Trauma - what is it and why should we be concerned?

Stress in the Workplace

The thing we all know about but don't talk about...that is until legislation made it an identifiable hazard that had to be eliminated, isolated or minimised.

Now we have another phenomenon that has also always been there but has not been given, in many organisations, credibility as a hazard to which staff may be exposed. It may be difficult to find the best words to define it, but anyone in a helping profession can describe it.

No VT under here mate!

Vicarious traumatization is an occupational hazard that is largely unrecognised and unaddressed. The reader may know similar terms such as Secondary Traumatic Stress, Compassion Fatigue or Compassion Stress amongst other labels.

In his book *Compassion Fatigue*, Charles Figley (1995) argues, 'There is a cost to caring,' and he is right. Emergency services personnel are acknowledged to be at high risk because of their professions but what about frontline administrative staff, welfare workers, health workers, call centre staff, workplace emergency response teams, managers and supervisors who go to the scene of incidents, counsellors and therapists, clergy/pastoral workers, staff support personnel – the list could go on.

In reality, no one is immune from the possibility of impact from someone else's trauma. How do you 'turn off' your work when you go home, let go of the terrible things you see and hear on the job? Many of us, especially those of us in a helping profession, are secondary witnesses to trauma almost everyday.

As we listen to our clients or colleagues tell about their trauma we bear witness to their victimization. We listen, we support and we validate their feelings and their experience. We offer them the opportunity to let go of some of their burden. As witnesses and healers, we can't help but to take in some of the emotional pain they have left with us. As the client/colleague releases some of their pain, we take it in. By the end of the day, we've collected bits and pieces of accounts of trauma. We may have pictures in our mind or intense feelings running through our body. We've become a witness too.

With the change to ACC, a person who is affected by vicarious trauma as a consequence of carrying out their work may be eligible for ACC. The time for saying to anyone 'it goes with the territory' or 'big boys don't cry' has gone. We need to be

aware, plan & act in the same way that we had to face the change to the Health & Safety Act 5th May 2003.

Eliminating or isolating this hazard is a big ask but minimising the risk to staff should be a given in any organisation. Be proactive – ask yourself and others who might be at risk. Have in place policy & procedures that are known, owned accepted by the organisation at all levels.

What are some of the signs?

- Pain e.g. headaches
- Digestive complaints
- Tiredness
- Impaired immune system
- Preoccupation/worrying
- Cynicism
- Rigidity
- Accident prone
- Absenteeism
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Mood swings
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Increased interpersonal conflicts
- Negativity
- Avoidance

These are just a few of the possible reactions that would suggest you or a colleague has been bitten by vicarious trauma/compassion fatigue! This is a hazard that needs to be dealt with as part of Organisational Risk Management.

Step one in managing affected staff is acceptance, accept that this is real for the individual. Get appropriate, professional help. Remember you and your organisation don't have to go it alone, there are education programmes available.