

Preventing and Managing Vicarious Trauma

The work you do with clients is some of the most challenging work in the health and helping professions. Listening to clients' trauma stories and experiences can result in **vicarious trauma**, sometimes called **compassion fatigue** or **secondary trauma**. Symptoms include difficulty managing emotions, withdrawing from family and friends, and avoiding work or seeing clients. It is important to recognize the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma because they can develop slowly over time and can mistakenly be attributed to other causes. Self-care is critical as a strategy to both prevent and manage vicarious trauma for your own well-being and so that clients continue to benefit from appropriate, sustainable care.

You can use the following steps to prevent and manage vicarious trauma. Remember that vicarious trauma is *not* a sign of weakness but a *normal* and *common* response to consistent, empathic exposure to the trauma of others. We can all benefit from extending the kindness and compassion we offer to others, to ourselves.

Step 1: Assess Yourself for Signs and Symptoms

Ask yourself: Have there been any changes to...

- The way I think about myself, others, or the world?
- My emotions?
- My behaviors?
- My physical well-being?

Step 2: Consider Strategies to Address Vicarious Trauma

- Engaging in self-care activities
- Reaching out to social supports
- Asking about professional support that may be available
- Using other tools in your self-care toolbox

Step 3: Make a Plan

- What activities, things, people, and places bring you joy, energy, or calm?
- What self-care activities do you currently engage in?
- Start small – what are one or two things you can try? When will you do it?
- *Positive affirmations* – reflect on what your clients and your work mean to you personally and professionally.



Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

It is important to check in with yourself and assess for the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma regularly so that it can be addressed as soon as possible:

Changes to thoughts about self, others, and the world

- Loss of a sense of meaning in life
- Feeling hopeless
- Diminished sense of purposes with career

Emotional Symptoms

- Changes in ability to manage emotions
- Feeling especially irritable or numb
- Excessive worry about safety
- Becoming easily distracted
- Difficulty in feeling compassion or empathizing with other

Behavioral symptoms

- Sleepiness or change in sleeping patterns
- Engaging in addictive or destructive behaviors
- Withdrawing from or increased conflict in relationships with family or friends
- Avoiding work interactions or difficulty separating oneself from work

Physical Symptoms

- Aches
- Pains
- Decreased resistance to illness

Tips for Creating a Plan to Address Vicarious Trauma

The following are some useful tips for creating a plan to address vicarious trauma:

- Choose some self-care activities. Include some brief self-care “rest spots” throughout your day such as: take a moment to check in with yourself, breathe deeply or take a walk, stretch your body.
- Identify family, friends, and colleagues that can support you.
- Ask about professional support that is available to you.
- Use **positive affirmations**. Regularly reflect on what working with your clients means to you, and how it serves your professional and personal growth. You can ask yourself:
 1. What do I enjoy about my work, even in stressful times?
 2. How is the current situation helping me grow as a professional?
 3. Where so I see positive movement in myself? In my clients? In the field?
 4. Who is it I respect and I can emulate?
- Writing your plan down can help give it clarity and anchor it in your mind.
- Start small – identify one or two things you can do, and when you can do it.

