



Vicarious trauma for people working in helping roles



Vicarious trauma can be an outcome for professionals who are constantly exposed to traumatic material.

Evidence shows people working in a trauma-based environment are greatly affected by the work they do, whether it is by:

- Direct exposure: seeing traumatic events
- Secondary exposure: hearing clients talk about trauma they have experienced

Vicarious trauma can be experienced as a shift from lacking motivation, and/or interest in what you're doing, into noticing your belief about the world has changed.

Understanding vicarious trauma and preventing it is both an individual and organisational challenge.

It's important to know it's not about worker weakness; it's more about being human.

Signs and symptoms:

- Loss of faith in people, changes in personal beliefs and feeling hopeless or useless
- Fear for the safety of your own family, pets or possessions
- Viewing the world and the people in it as only good or only bad
- Intrusive thoughts, images or sensations related to violence
- Anxiety before, during, and/or after meeting with a client or family/community member
- Feeling annoyed, angry or frustrated at the people you are working with, or at the world in general, for no particular reason
- Changes in sleeping habits, including having nightmares
- Changes in eating habits, alcohol and/or cigarette use

Preventing vicarious trauma

Professional strategies

- Establish a wellbeing plan and share it with your manager and/or work colleagues (preferably before you need it). This may include identifying specific people to approach for help and support, including professional resources you can access.
- Use regular supervision and debriefing at work. If you don't currently have supervision and debriefing, ask for it to be arranged.
- Include regular stress busters in every work day (eg: taking quick walks, making a cuppa, stretching, and deep breathing).
- When you find work too upsetting:
 - » Seek ways to reduce the direct contact you have with a client(s)
 - » Negotiate with colleagues and your supervisor about certain tasks that may feel bad for you
- » Get others involved to help share the load
- » Prioritise other minor work tasks to change your focus for a little bit
- Discuss work challenges with others who are doing the same sort of work. Be open to hearing the experience of others and what they do to reduce their pressure.
- Have very clear boundaries between your work life and your home life. Make sure other people are aware of these boundaries.
- Allow yourself to feel upset, angry or frustrated. Think about where you can express these feelings safely.
- Arrange counselling if you are struggling with experiences.
- Complete education/training to gain skills that equip you to do your job well.

Personal strategies

- Look at other causes of stress in your life and try to reduce them.
- Keep your body healthy by exercising and have regular health checks.
- Eat a well-balanced diet.
- Get enough sleep and make time to relax.
- Have a personal life outside work with supportive, positive friends who bring you joy and laughter.
- Limit your exposure to trauma stories (question whether it's helpful to watch or listen to content that involves trauma).
- Have clear boundaries with friends/family (eg: not talking about work topics in your time off).
- Find ways to be connected to your own spiritual fulfillment.
- Have some creative interests.
- Find ways to clear the mind, like connecting to Country, sitting around a fire and having fun.

Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)

Metropolitan area: A free 24-hr emergency service providing medical and counselling services for people who have experienced a recent (within 14 days) sexual assault, and counselling services for any form of unwanted sexual contact that has happened in the past for all genders ages 13 years and above.

State-wide area: Advice and education and training can be provided to services across the state of Western Australia.

Call SARC on (08) 6458 1828 or Freecall 1800 199 888.

Email SARC Education and Training on SARCTraining@health.wa.gov.au

Yorgum Healing Services

Disability counselling, intensive family support and National Redress services

Call 1800 469 371

13 Yarn

The first national crisis support line for mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping, 24hrs/7 days a week

Call 139 276 (13YARN)

WA Police

To report a sexual assault:

Go to your local **police station**.

Call **131 444**

Go online **[Safe2Say.com.au](https://www.safe2say.com.au)**