

# Signs of Vicarious Trauma



When we are experiencing overwhelming volumes of information—especially information that holds an emotional charge—our bodies, minds and spirit adapt to help us cope. At times, the way we cope may help in the moment but may have long-term negative results. For example, our bodies may give us an extra push of adrenaline to make it through a challenging time period. However, the moment we go on vacation, we immediately get sick for the first three days. The adrenaline push that was needed in the moment eventually “catches up” with us and we feel the full effects of pushing ourselves beyond a healthy limit.

Professionals who routinely come in contact with trauma and suffering as part of their work lives may be affected. Regular interaction with trauma can take a toll on the medical practitioners who treat injuries that result from abuse, on law enforcement officers who investigate crime, on counselors who provide emotional support, on members of the legal system who strive to administer justice, and all others in helping fields that are charged with supporting others through difficult times or are somehow—directly or indirectly—working to end to hardship and suffering of others.

**Vicarious trauma** happens when we accumulate and carry the stories of trauma—including images, sounds, resonant details—we have heard, which then come to inform our worldview. The stories of trauma and suffering start to fill us up and can become part of us. Vicarious trauma is a human response to the experience of coming face-to-face with the reality of trauma and the difficulties of the human experience. It can slowly shift our outlook and deny us the perspective of a world that exists beyond the traumatic experience.

The following list is not meant to be an exhaustive catalog of symptoms, but rather information that may spark your own reflections on how your work may affect you in both personal and professional situations. We encourage you to read this list with no judgments attached to the information. We are all coping to the best of our ability. Understanding the costs associated with some coping strategies can help us grow closer to solutions.

## **Exhaustion and physical ailments:**

- Constantly feeling tired, even after having time to rest
- Physical tension in the body when it's not needed
- Physical pain throughout the day, such as headaches or back pain that you “push through”
- Difficulty falling asleep or excessive sleeping
- Falling sick the moment you are able to rest, such as on a vacation

**Emotional shifts:**

- Hypersensitivity to emotionally charged material
- Feeling disconnected from your emotions and/or your body
- Guilt for having more resources/opportunities than those you serve
- Feeling like no matter how much you give, it will never be enough
- Feeling helpless or hopeless toward the future
- Increased levels of anger, irritability, resentment or cynicism

**Thought patterns:**

- Difficulty in seeing multiple perspectives or new solutions
- Jumping to conclusions, rigid thinking, or difficulty being thoughtful and deliberate
- Questioning, *"Is any of this effective? Am I making any difference?"*
- Minimizing the suffering of others in comparison to the most severe incidents or situations
- Intrusive thoughts and imagery related to the traumatic material you have heard/seen

**Behavioral shifts:**

- Absenteeism and attrition
- Avoidance of work, relationships, responsibilities
- Dread of activities that used to be positive or neutral
- Using behaviors to escape (eating, alcohol/drugs, caffeine, TV, shopping, work)

**Relationship changes:**

- No separation of personal and professional time; being the helper in every relationship
- Viewing other people who are not involved in your same field as less important
- Difficulty relating to other people's day-to-day experiences without comparing them to yourself or others
- Absence of a personal life that is not connected to your work
- Seeing danger everywhere and hypervigilance to the safety of those you care about
- Sense of persecution or martyrdom; holding external forces responsible for personal feelings and struggles
- Isolating yourself completely from others or only interacting with people who are in your same field or can relate to your experiences.

As we become aware of how contact with trauma and suffering manifests—and of the various strategies for managing those manifestations—it becomes necessary for us to craft a path to sustainability that works for us as individuals. This path is different for everyone and will only be effective if it is informed by the awareness of our individual struggles and opportunities for self-care and resilience. Each of us must create and commit to travel our own path to sustainability.

If you need assistance with self-care and coping with vicarious trauma, contact your EAP at 800-553-7798 to set up an appointment with a counselor.

*Adapted from Joyful Heart Foundation, [www.joyfulheartfoundation.org](http://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org)*

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