



# Safer Seven

On: Vicarious Trauma



## 1. Introduction

Vicarious trauma or Secondary trauma is when you are affected by something that happens to someone else. This can be especially common in health, social care, police and many other services where we are supporting someone through a difficult episode in their life, seeing their trauma.

The risk of secondary trauma is that we then carry this with us into work with other people, with a negative impact on that intervention, and we can continue to acquire secondary trauma. This can lead to us feeling unhappy at work, leaving jobs and roles sooner, as well as physical and psychological effects

## 2. Processing Trauma in a work context

Working in pressured systems, constant crisis or reactive situations means it is more likely that focus becomes very narrow, shutting down professional curiosity.

When we recognise how the biology of trauma prompts automatic responses, we are more able to take steps to prevent it or minimise the impact – for example noticing when we are going into a heightened state, being able to take time out or to think through why that response is occurring may help us to calm back down more quickly, moving us back into our window of tolerance.

## 3. Moral Distress and Injury

**Moral Distress** – The feeling of unease stemming from situations where institutionally required behaviour does not align with moral principles. This can be as a result of a lack of power or structural limitations, such as insufficient staff resources, training or time.

**Moral Injury** – can arise where sustained moral distress leads to impaired function or longer-term psychological harm. Moral injury can produce profound guilt and shame and in some cases also a sense of betrayal, anger and profound 'moral disorientation'.

## 4. Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

- A change in your beliefs about yourself, other people and the world
- Experience nightmares, flashbacks and or intrusive thoughts
- Hypervigilance and difficulty concentrating
- Difficulties in relaxing and falling asleep
- Compassion fatigue

In addition, symptoms attributed to burnout could also be an indication that someone is experiencing vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress.

## 5. Suggestions for co-workers

If you believe a co-worker might be experiencing negative reactions to vicarious trauma, consider:

- talking to them individually about the impact of the work
- encouraging adoption of good clear work boundaries
- encouraging them to attend to the basics; sleep, healthy eating, hygiene, and exercise
- supporting connections with family, friends, and coworkers;
- referring them to organisational supports such as a peer support team/ employee assistance program
- encouraging them to discuss their experience with their supervisor.

## 6. Suggestions for Supervisors

Consider supporting your staff by:

- discussing vicarious trauma as part of supervision;
- allowing flexible work schedules, recognising the need for and protecting down time, while staying attuned to the possibility of withdrawal or isolation;
- creating time and a physical space at work for reflection through reading, writing, prayer, and meditation, among other activities;
- referring to therapeutic and professional assistance, when appropriate.

## 7. Further information:

Book onto our Trauma Informed Practice Training:

<https://dudleysafeguarding.event-booking.org/>

Visit our Learning Zone to see our selection of briefings and more :

<https://dudleysafeguarding.org.uk/learning-zone/>