

Mental Health & Wellbeing at the Bar

Vicarious trauma



Wellbeing
at the Bar

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma is what you may feel when you read or hear someone else's trauma; where you may begin to experience symptoms associated with the event. Anyone can be affected.

Vicarious trauma may begin due to natural developed empathy, i.e. the capacity to imagine what it might have been like for the person going through it.

This empathy is a natural human reaction mediated through our mirror neurons allowing us to feel some of what they went through. Since the brain cannot make a distinction between a thought and an action, it may respond with the same 'flight, fight, fear' response as if it were happening to us. Hence symptoms may develop, and the longer or greater frequency of dealing with these issues, without intervention or reflection to manage the process, the worse the symptoms may be. Many people may be unaware of being affected until a major incident (sometimes unrelated) triggers a response.

Many professional workers have jobs that require them to witness read or hear the stories of traumatic events that have happened to the people they work with. Commonly those working in police, emergency services, army, criminal law, family, law, sexual assault, domestic and institutional violence, child protection, immigration and medical, disaster and war settings are most at risk.

What are the symptoms of vicarious trauma?

- Adrenalin addiction – being unable to avoid risk taking activities and behaviour. Feeling a sense of low mood and malaise without such activities
- Avoidance – avoiding certain types of matters, or clients, forgetting, avoiding meetings, sickness
- Hyperarousal – having trouble sleeping, short fuse, startle effect, over reactions, rescue mentality, feeling like you can never do enough
- Hypo arousal – withdrawal, tiredness, lack of motivation difficulty getting things done, flat emotion
- Somatic disturbance – aches and pains, lowered immunity, reactions smells and sounds, headaches, tiredness and accidents / injuries

How can you support/recover?

- Refer for professional support
- Manage workloads
- Provide safe and professional debriefing and opportunities for peer and professional support
- Be creative and active outside of your work and maintain social support networks to reconnect with your own environment
- Spend quality time with family and friends
- Ensure you feel a sense of pride in yourself for the important work that you are doing

Dealing with vicarious trauma

- Raise awareness and give training to those potentially exposed
- Recognise and validate the condition
- Provide supervision, mentoring, and counselling
- Remember that you do not have to continue working in this area if you feel it is having a negative impact upon you and your health
- Feel proud of what you are doing, rather than guilt
- Seek to increase your resilience skills

Safeguarding your working practice

- Prepare yourself to approach material, images and content firmly with your 'work hat' on
- Only deal with the material that the role demands e.g. where schedules or statements may suffice, rather than viewing original videos or multiple viewings of vulnerable witness interviews
- Consider carefully how much you re-expose yourself and others to this material
- Take regular breaks, performing other activities after which occupy your mind or performing a mindfulness technique before or after your work
- Change body posture if you feel your body tense or becoming distressed from the work. This can actively alleviate the mind
- If you find you are experiencing recurring images and thoughts, acknowledge it as such, then consciously bring forward a positive image and focus on the positive one
- Prepare to respond positively to your mentors and colleagues if they seek to support or signpost you for concerns they've observed
- Acknowledge that your work is challenging and normalize the fact that from time to time you may need to address issue which may arise
- Ensure that you seek professional help if your own practices are not assisting you

Further safeguarding

Your chambers or organisation should consider:

- Having good occupational health policies and training
- Ensuring there are regular meetings and evaluations (face to face)
- Putting in place wellbeing committees and practices
- Promoting positive psychology and supportive behaviour that does not include cynical or destructive behaviour
- Ensuring change is managed appropriately to reduce anxiety e.g. with practice or rules
- Communicating and having supportive mentoring
- Continuing Professional Development

How do you support/mentor pupils and colleagues?

- Regular meetings or discussions to develop awareness of your mentees practice or current demands.
- Agree to 'check in' during difficult work load periods or following a challenging case/work load period.
- Discuss & help them reflect upon their work load and how they are currently managing it.
- Follow up to aid evaluation of their management and support strategies.
- Consider directly, what they felt they're doing well with managing, and not so well with managing and what can be put in place to support or change difficulties.
- Ensure there is open and supportive dialogue with other management committee or clerks to create a 'safe' environment for raising concerns.
- Note any obvious changes in demeanor and supportively raise your concern.
- Have a clinical support to refer them to for confidential assistance.

“The fact I am writing this at 2:30am on a Monday morning is a case in point. I am a busy junior at the criminal bar with a practice of almost entirely serious sexual cases. I find it impossible to switch off, and particularly when my children (now adult) were younger, deeply distressing having to watch DVDs of children being raped, tortured and abused and then going home to my own family...when one is doing rape trials back to back for weeks and months it is very hard to achieve a level of normality in daily life and I know I am not alone in this.”

Anne Richardson, Senior Junior, 30 years of call