

Are you a volunteer, counselor, or teacher who often listens while people share their traumatic experiences? Do you volunteer your time to help others who have experienced trauma, including the deportation of a spouse or parent, family separation due to immigration enforcement, or even a cruel workplace raid? Have you ever felt like you just do not have the energy, physically or mentally, to help others even though you want to? You may be experiencing Vicarious Trauma.

Vicarious, or secondary trauma occurs when people in helping professions, even as volunteers, feel a gradual change or disruption of their thoughts, beliefs, feelings/emotions, images, and spirit as a result of repeated exposure to other's traumatic experiences. The person can experience their own symptoms of trauma from hearing these experiences and witnessing the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured. If you believe you are experiencing vicarious trauma or would like to learn more about what it is and how to combat the symptoms, read and share the resources below. This webpage explores vicarious trauma, why it occurs, symptoms, and coping strategies. Unfortunately, vicarious trauma happens too often in our movements for justice, so read on to learn the best ways to take care of yourself and reduce the possibility of it effecting your work.

Vicarious Trauma & Compassion Fatigue

Vicarious Traumatic Stress (STS) is a genuine disorder that affects individuals who did not witness the traumatic event first-hand but were exposed to it in other ways such as through their profession as clergy, counselors, or emergency personnel or any familiarity with someone who was directly impacted, or repeated exposure through the media.

The symptoms of vicarious trauma are often compared to those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and may include: agitation or irritability, confusion, intense fear, hypervigilant, angry outbursts, sadness or depression, feelings of guilt or hopelessness, nightmares or sleeplessness, constantly worried about death, unable to focus or concentrate, avoidance of public places, chronic illness (i.e. headaches, stomach pain), socially withdrawn or dissociated or insensitive to violence.

PTSD can occur after a primary trauma that happens in your own life, when your well-being has been threatened in some way. For example, the death of a family member, divorce, severe car accident, serious illness, natural disaster, terrorism, witnessing a death, rape, or domestic abuse. However, vicarious trauma can also cause PTSD and can lead to avoidance or can trigger past trauma causing extreme anxiety or panic. PTSD can also cause **Compassion Fatigue**, which limits your capacity for empathy, hope, and compassion for others and yourself.

Prolonged compassion fatigue, or **Burnout** is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It is when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally tired, and unable to meet the constant demands of your work. These feelings can happen to anyone especially those working or volunteering in a helping position. This is a normal outcome of strong empathy and happens in the nervous system while we are

listening to others. Our neurons light up- mirroring someone's horror or fear and we then internalize fight, flight or freeze reactions.

Physical symptoms of vicarious trauma include: insomnia, headaches, stomach aches, chronic fatigue, other physical pains. **Behavioral symptoms include:** increased use of alcohol/drugs, reliance on other addictions (shopping, work, food), anger/irritability, exaggerated sense of responsibility, impaired ability to make decisions, hyper vigilance, constantly feeling in danger, intrusive imagery, someone else's trauma comes up in our dreams/thoughts, insensitive to emotions.

How do we Treat or Prevent vicarious trauma?

- Strong social support, in and out of the workplace
- Increase self-awareness, notice changes in your body (heart racing, anxiety)
- Good self-care and work/life balance
- Limit and reduce exposure to trauma (if possible)
- Counseling/therapy
- Professional development, training in trauma
- Being in supportive spaces helps to mitigate secondary traumas
- Debrief what was heard/exposed to with others. It is important to ask the listener if they have time and are consenting to listen to our trauma as this will expose them to trauma as well.

Coping skills:

- Deep breathing: signals to your brain it is alright to calm down. It allows your brain to make logical decisions instead of acting out of anxiety.
- Self-soothing through the 5 sense: can calm yourself and stop unhealthy thoughts by listening to what you feel, taste, smell, see, or hear
- Practicing gratitude: simply saying, thinking, or writing things you are grateful for

Books (all available at the [Tattered Cover](#))

- [Detox Your Heart: Meditations for Healing Emotional Trauma](#)
- [Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror](#), by Judith L. Herman
- [Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds](#), by Adriene Maree brown
- [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and body in the healing of Trauma](#), by Bessel van der Kolk, MD
- [Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times](#), by Carolina De Robertis
- [Trauma Stewardship An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others](#), by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk. See also, Laura's [TED Talk](#)
- [Dear Sister - Letters from Survivors](#), by Lisa Factora-Borchers

Articles:

- [Secondary Trauma': When PTSD is Contagious - The Atlantic](#)
- Self-Care Assessment in Nia's Youth Program books (on Star Cafe)

Videos:

- [Amy Cunningham: Drowning in Empathy: The Cost of Trauma](#)
- [Laura van Dernoot Lipsky: Beyond the Cliff/TEDx](#)

Podcasts:

- [Surviving the end of the world](#)
- [The Compassion Fatigue Podcast](#)
- [Therapy Chat](#)
- [Time and Tide](#)
- [Gun Violence and Vicarious Trauma](#)

Web based resources: [Generative somatics](#) seeks to grow a transformative social and environmental justice movement -- one that integrates personal and social transformation. See also, [Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services](#) (BRYCS), this website focuses on the wellbeing of immigrant children and has many resources and links to other resources available in multiple languages. Resources in Spanish can be found here: <http://www.brycs.org/refugee-portal/spanish.cfm> & <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiencias/Informaci%C3%B3n-en-Espa%C3%B1ol>

Deep Breathing

With one hand on the chest and the other on the belly, take a deep breath in through the nose, ensuring the diaphragm inflates with enough air to create a stretch in the lungs. Inhale for a count of four, then exhale for a count of four. Deep breathing signals to your brain it is alright to calm down. It allows your brain to make logical decisions instead of acting out of anxiety.

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Practice Gratitude

Practicing gratitude. Simply speaking aloud, thinking about, or writing down one to three things you are grateful for can help us experience more positive emotions such as optimism, enthusiasm, love, joy, and happiness, while protecting us from the destructive emotions of envy, greed, bitterness, and resentment.

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Sooth Tension

To address tension from head to toe, close the eyes and focus on tensing and relaxing each muscle group for two to three seconds each. Start with the feet and toes, then move up to the knees, thighs, glutes, chest, arms, hands, neck, jaw, and eyes—all while maintaining deep, slow breaths. Breathe in through the nose while the muscles tense, then breathe out through the mouth on release.

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The 5 Senses

Try self-soothing through the five senses. Calm yourself and stop circular thinking by listing five things you can feel, five things you can taste, five things you can smell, five things you can see, or five things you can hear.

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