

Understanding and Managing Vicarious Trauma

For people supporting others after a traumatic event

Supporting people who have been affected by a traumatic event - even if you were not directly involved - can take an emotional toll. This is known as **vicarious trauma**. It is a normal and humane response to caring deeply for others and this sometimes mean you will be exposed to their distress. Vicarious trauma occurs when you are repeatedly exposed to others' trauma through listening, helping, or supporting. Over time, this exposure can affect your emotional wellbeing, outlook, and sense of safety.

SIGNS OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA

You may notice:

- Feeling emotionally drained, overwhelmed, or numb
- Increased anxiety, sadness, irritability, or helplessness
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Intrusive thoughts about the event
- A heightened sense of danger or loss of trust
- Withdrawing from others or feeling disconnected

These reactions are common and do not mean you are failing or "not coping".

WHO MIGHT BE AFFECTED?

- Frontline and support workers
- Managers and team leaders
- HR, people leaders, and wellbeing staff
- Clinicians, counsellors, and peer supporters
- Family members and friends providing ongoing support

WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR WELLBEING

Here are some of the most common reactions to grief and ways you can respond:

Set emotional boundaries

- You can care deeply without carrying everything alone
- It's okay to say "I need a break" or ask for support

Limit exposure

- Take breaks from distressing conversations and media
- Share responsibility with others where possible

Ground yourself

- Use simple grounding techniques (slow breathing, movement, focusing on the present, mindfulness and box breathing exercise)
- Reconnect with routines that give you stability

Stay connected

- Talk with colleagues, peers, or trusted people
- Use supervision, debriefs, or reflective spaces if available

Prioritise self-care

- Rest, nutrition, and hydration are essential, not optional
- Do something that helps you recharge, even briefly

SUPPORTING OTHERS WITHOUT BURNING OUT

- Listen with empathy, not problem-solving
- Avoid taking responsibility for outcomes you can't control



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- Encourage professional support when appropriate
- Remember: being present is often enough

WHEN TO SEEK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Consider reaching out for professional help if:

- Symptoms persist or worsen over time
- You feel emotionally numb or constantly on edge
- Your work, sleep, or relationships are affected

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