

# Vicarious Trauma Information for Civil Servants

## Definition - What is Vicarious Trauma?

**Vicarious trauma** is an occupational challenge for people working with individuals/groups who have experienced trauma. Trauma can be defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. Vicarious trauma is not a direct experience of trauma, but occurs when your mental health is negatively impacted because of ongoing exposure to others' experiences of trauma. This may include direct contact with individuals/groups or processing information such as witness statements, distressing images, etc.

Bearing witness to another's vulnerabilities can be an uncomfortable, challenging and sometimes traumatic experience; which can stir up our own emotions, vulnerabilities and past experiences. We can also experience some of the other person's pain when we connect with them during times of distress.

Certain roles within the Civil Service might be more at risk of experiencing vicarious trauma due to ongoing exposure to distressing content or challenging situations as part of their daily work.

For example:

- Staff reading/processing information with traumatic content as part of their role
- Staff who are working abroad in emergency response roles supporting members of the public, for example those who are victims of a natural disaster
- Staff who are dealing with members of the public who are in challenging/distressing situations

Vicarious trauma goes way beyond feeling tired, overwhelmed or overworked. It refers to the stage when supporting an individual/group experiencing trauma leads to a change in your own worldview. Fundamental values are called into question leaving the individual feeling unsafe and uncertain about the core beliefs that had sustained them.

**The expectations that we can be  
immersed in suffering and loss daily  
and not be touched by it  
is as unrealistic as being able to walk  
through water without getting wet.**

BY RACHEL NAOMI REMEN

## Signs and Symptoms

Involvement in emotionally demanding situations over a prolonged period of time can cause physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. However it is important to note that not everyone dealing with individuals/groups who have experienced trauma will be negatively impacted. Vicarious trauma is not inevitable.

### Signs and symptoms may include the following:

**Physically** - We all have one part of our body that lets us know that we are under stress or heading for burnout. The same applies with vicarious trauma. The symptoms can range from digestive problems to muscular problems such as sore back/neck. Other symptoms can include but are not limited to; heart palpitations, insomnia/sleep difficulties and exhaustion.

**Behaviourally** - Vicarious trauma can manifest in increased use of alcohol and drugs for escapism. Avoidance of social events and withdrawal from interactions with colleagues. It can lead to feelings of anger and irritability at home with family and loved ones. Feelings of helplessness and impaired appetite or binge eating.

**Psychologically** - Vicarious trauma can cause us to feel depressed, anxious, angry, exhausted, and guilty. We may experience a reduced capacity to feel empathy towards clients, family or friends. A sense of resentment at demands being placed on us at work or at home may also manifest and sometimes even suicidal thoughts may emerge. If you are experiencing prolonged feelings of hopelessness or suicidal thoughts, please seek professional help. Contact your GP or mental health services.

### What qualifies as exposure to Trauma (as defined by the DSM-5)

1. Direct personal exposure
2. Witnessing the trauma of others
3. Indirect exposure through trauma experience of a family member or other close associate
4. Repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of a traumatic event, which applies to workers who encounter the consequences of traumatic events as part of their professional responsibilities



**Vicarious trauma happens not only  
because you care about people who  
have been hurt, but because you feel  
committed or responsible to help.**

FROM HEADINGTON INSTITUTE ON UNDERSTANDING AND  
ADDRESSING VICARIOUS TRAUMA BY DR. LAURIE ANNE  
PEARLMAN AND LISA MCKAY

## Self-Care

Self-care needs to part of your “day to day routine” and not something you do now and again.

### Maintain a good work-life balance

- Recognise when you need time off
- Plan time off where possible, and utilise it well
- Develop techniques that help you leave work behind at the end of the day
- Avoid unnecessary monitoring of work emails and calls outside of office hours
- Recognise your triggers to stress

If you are impacted by your work **TALK** to someone about the impact, this may be:

- Your manager
- A colleague
- Your *buddy* (if there is a *Buddy System* in place)
- A mentor (if there is a mentor in place)
- The Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS)

This will give you an opportunity to talk about your experience and express your emotions.

### Daily Routine – Hints and Tips

- **FRESH AIR** – a change of scenery can bring a change in energy and a change in mood
- **EXERCISE** – incorporate some exercise into your daily life, this releases endorphins that help you feel good
- **DAILY PRACTICES** – such as mindfulness can help to calm racing minds and ground you in the present moment
- **STRESS** – be aware of what causes stress in your life and get help managing it
- **SLEEP** – develop good sleeping habits, sleep enables the body and mind to rest, relax and renew itself
- **NUTRITION** – it is important to eat well for both physical and mental health
- **RELAXATION** – give yourself permission to unwind
- **FUN** – do something you enjoy, you deserve it
- **ACCOMPLISHMENTS** – at the end of each day acknowledge what you have achieved (not what needs to be done)
- **SOCIAL SUPPORTS** – linking in with friends and family regularly
- **GRATITUDE** – identify and be grateful for the positive things in your life

If you are finding it hard to leave the job behind you at the end of the day, are preoccupied, not sleeping and/or finding it hard to detach or switch off from work, you can talk to the CSEAS about developing your own **SELF-CARE** tool box

## How you, as a Manager, can support staff who may be experiencing Vicarious Trauma

- Talk to your staff if you notice any changes in their mood, work output, motivation, interaction with other colleagues, etc.
- Check in with staff regularly, ask them how they are coping
- Acknowledge efforts and achievements where possible, particularly during specific periods of increased pressure and demands
- The focus of concern can often be on the work that staff are doing, and not on their general wellbeing. It is important to be mindful of this and try to adopt a balanced approach between the two
- Listen to your staffs' suggestions, feedback and concerns regarding the work
- Lead by example in how you manage your own work life balance
- Check-in with your staff and acknowledge how the person is feeling with regard to their work
- Consider introducing a peer support/ buddy system to support staff in challenging areas of work
- Keep up-to-date on what best practice is in supporting staff working in this area

## How the CSEAS can help

The CSEAS is a support service which offers a wide range of free and confidential\* supports designed to assist civil servants in managing work and/or life difficulties. Employee Assistance Officers (EAOs) have the necessary skills and training to help you to identify the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma, and are available to offer you support.

The CSEAS is also available to support people managers, and can discuss staff issues in an anonymised way. If you believe a staff member to be experiencing difficulties, please remind them that the CSEAS is available as a source of support.

If you are experiencing vicarious trauma, or at risk for vicarious trauma, it can be useful to develop personal coping skills to help you in dealing with stressors in life in general, and the particular stressors of your job. Your EAO can work with you on developing these skills to safeguard against vicarious trauma. Referrals to relevant professional agencies and support services can be discussed if required.

\*See [www.cseas.per.gov.ie](http://www.cseas.per.gov.ie) for details on exceptions to confidentiality and information on GDPR

The CSEAS Central Helpdesk (Tel: 0761 000 030) is available where you can speak with an **on-duty** EAO: Mon – Thurs: 9 am – 5.45 pm, Fri: 9am – 5.15pm. Appointments can be arranged with your own EAO outside of office hours by prior arrangement. Alternatively you can email the CSEAS on: [cseas@per.gov.ie](mailto:cseas@per.gov.ie) or contact your own EAO using the *Meet the Team* section on our website [www.cseas.per.gov.ie](http://www.cseas.per.gov.ie)

## **Further reading**

- 8 Keys to Safe Trauma Recovery: Take-charge Strategies to Empower Your Healing (8 Keys to Mental Health), Babette Rothschild (2010)
- Burnout - The Cost of Caring, Christina Maslach (2003)
- Healing Trauma, A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body, Peter A. Levine, PHD (2005)
- Help for the Helper: The Psychophysiology of Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma, Babette Rothschild (2006)
- In an Unspoken Voice - How the Body Release Trauma and Restores Goodness, Peter A. Levine, PHD (2010)
- Mental Health Workers' Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Trauma, Traumatic Stress and Self-Care, Soraya M. Sawicki Lcsw (2019)
- The Body Keeps the Score - Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma, Bessel van der Kolk (2014)
- The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment, Babette Rothschild (2000)
- The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization, Francoise Mathieu (2012)
- The Resilient Practitioner – Burnout Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for Counsellors, Therapists, and Health Professionals, Thomas M. Skovholt and Michelle Trotter-Mathison (2001)
- The Wounded Healer, Countertransference from a Jungian Perspective, David Sedgwick (1994)
- Trauma and Memory Brain and Body in a Search for the Living Past: A Practical Guide for Understanding and Working with Traumatic Memory, Peter A. Levine (2015)
- Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma, Peter A. Levine with Ann Frederick (2017)

3 fundamentals that I need to practice daily in order to mind my Health and Wellbeing						
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

*Pick from the suggested list or add your own*

We will give you a start Suggested List- but you do your own	
Utilise your daily breaks and your annual leave	
Get some fresh air (at least 15 minutes)	
Put away all electronic devices an hour before bed time	
Talk about what is bothering you	
Acknowledge what went well today	
If overwhelmed, compile a to-do-list	
Meet or call a friend for a chat	
Visit your favourite spot	
Have lunch/dinner with friends	
Get your hair done	
Watch a movie	
Read a book, paper, magazine or article	
Link in with friends on social media	
Listen to some music	
Meet a friend for a chat	
Do some de-cluttering	
If you anticipate a busy week ahead, organise yourself	
If feeling the need for a break, plan some time off	
Fun and a laughter are important for mental health	
Learn something new	
Painting	
Rewards - give yourself a treat	
Eat healthily and regularly and have a good stock of food available	
Own suggestions	

Prepared by the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service,

Department of Public Expenditure & Reform

