

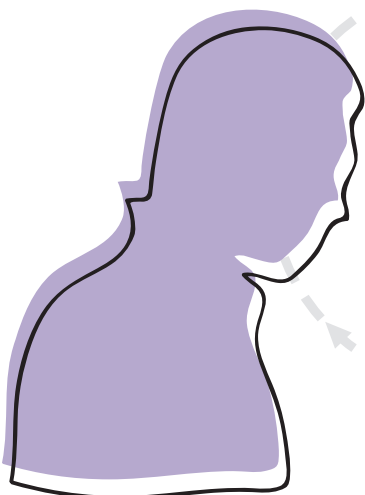
Preventing, Recognizing & Addressing Vicarious Trauma

A Tool for Educators and Schools

- Anyone working in a schools will encounter students experiencing significant challenges, and we know that hearing distressing stories about students' lives can be taxing.
- Teachers often feel helpless in the face of these challenges, and when we consider how complex students' lives can be, there are rarely "easy fixes."
- Understanding the nature and effects of vicarious trauma can be a first step in preventing, recognizing and dealing with it.

What is vicarious trauma?

Also known as secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma is a negative reaction to trauma exposure and includes a range of symptoms that are similar to experiencing trauma directly. Vicarious trauma is common but there are ways to prevent it and limit its impacts.



"When I get home, I can't stop thinking about what happened at work."

"Sometimes it's hard to hear what my students have to say."

1

ADVOCATE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT.

Importantly, individual teachers cannot be solely responsible for preventing or dealing with the effects of vicarious trauma. Doing so requires a culture of support, which means a team effort from the teacher to the school level, and adequate resources to provide good care and a safe learning environment. Leaders should engage front-line, administrative/support staff and, as appropriate, students and families in developing organizational supports for vicarious trauma.

The first step is prevention. All school staff will work with students exposed to traumatic experiences; schools that prevent and address vicarious trauma promote a better work environment for staff and, ultimately, a better learning environment for students.

2

TAKE STOCK of the school environment.

Do conditions in the school increase or decrease the likelihood of vicarious trauma having a negative impact?¹ Consider:

- Does the workload allow teachers to attend to their own care needs, as well as those of student; for example, are there adequate breaks?
- How is exposure to trauma acknowledged and dealt with?
- How are teachers expected to act when exposed to vulnerability (in themselves, their colleagues, or their students)? Tough? Distant? Compassionate?
- Is reflective supervision from an administrator formally available?
- Are staff encouraged to debrief informally amongst themselves, perhaps using a “buddy system”?
- How are teachers who are struggling supported? Are people seen as “burned out” (an individual’s weakness and problem) or “used up” by the school’s/board’s practices?
- How is workplace violence - including between staff, or students, or staff-student/student-staff acknowledged and dealt with?

¹ Vicarious trauma can influence your ability to best serve your students, and look after yourself. A trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC) approach is therefore recommended; see our tool: [\[URL\]](#)

Hearing about the trauma of others can also lead teachers to re-live their own trauma experiences. For example, we know that in female-dominated professions such as nursing, the prevalence of intimate partner violence is higher than in the general population. Supports should include ways for staff to address their own trauma histories.

3

BE AWARE of the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma and how to recognize them in both yourself and your co-workers.

Signs and symptoms can include:

- Extreme or rapid changes in emotions (e.g., involuntary crying)
- Difficulty managing boundaries with students
- Increased sensitivity to violence
- Relationship difficulties
- Physical symptoms (e.g., aches, pains)
- Sleep difficulties
- Intrusive imagery
- Cynicism
- Aggression
- Social withdrawal

4

IF YOU'RE CONCERNED, take an online self-test, such as the one here: <http://www.compassionfatigue.org/pages/selftest.html>

5

PRACTICE SELF-CARE. Whether for prevention or treatment of vicarious trauma, focusing on self-care is a good idea.

Anyone who works in a helping profession is at risk. Even if these experiences are currently absent, it's important to take steps to keep well. Everyone is different, but self-care might look like:

- Healthy diet
- Adequate sleep
- Spending time in nature
- Spending time with friends & family
- Exercise (of any kind)
- Relaxation