

Trauma- & Violence-Informed Care and Educator Well-Being

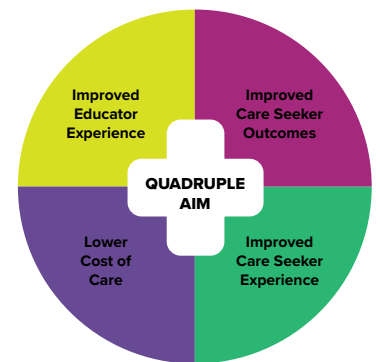
Teachers form caring relationships with students, and we know that when you care and are worried about them, it can be taxing.

The ways we are expected to work may not align with our ethics & values; when we feel our students are poorly served or even harmed, this can be distressing.

We often feel helpless in the face of this suffering and distress, how complex people's lives can be, and the disconnects between what we *can* do and we *should* do – there are rarely “easy fixes.”

Understanding the nature and effects of vicarious trauma and moral distress can be a first step in preventing, recognizing and dealing with their effects on staff and organizations.

Your well-being is one of the core goals of the “quadruple aim” of system improvement and is necessary for both a healthy workforce and a safe workplace. It also underpins excellence in trauma- and violence-informed service delivery. This tool provides key concepts related to understanding and assessing provider well-being, with a focus on organizational strategies, including how leaders can support staff in self-care strategies.



What is Moral Distress?

The ways that Educators are expected to work may not align with their professional ethics and codes of conduct. When students are poorly served or even harmed due to these mismatches, educators may experience moral distress or moral injury.

What is Vicarious Trauma?

Also known as secondary traumatic stress (STS), vicarious trauma is a negative reaction to trauma exposure and includes a range of symptoms similar to experiencing trauma directly. Vicarious trauma is common but there are ways to limit its impacts .

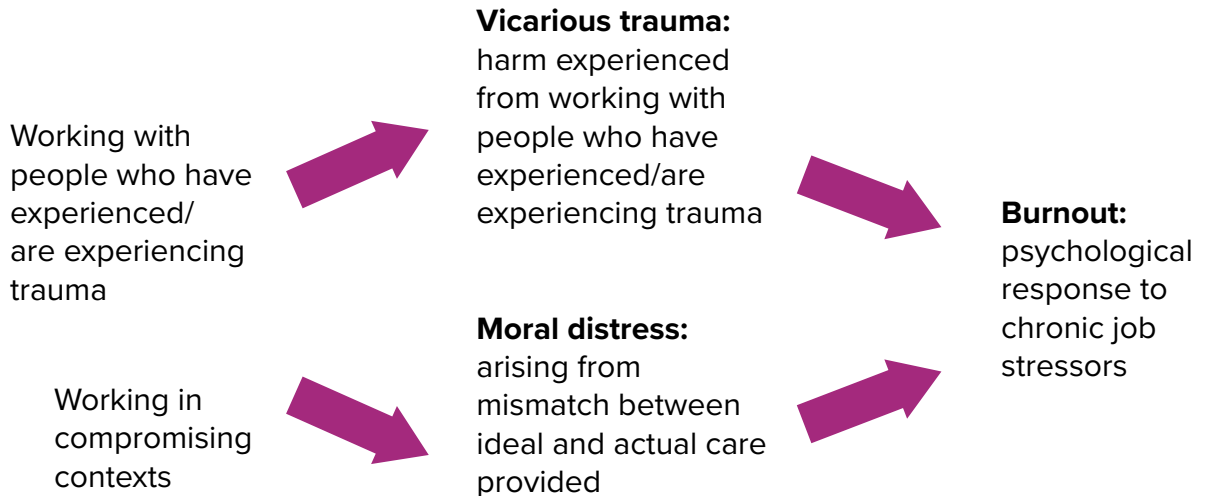
“When I get home, I can’t stop thinking about what happened at work.”



“There’s a disconnect between how we do things and what I know we should do – it’s hard to watch people suffer and not be able to change things.”

What Are the Effects?

The cumulative effects of vicarious trauma and/or moral distress on educator well-being, as shown below,¹ can lead to burnout – when we feel we can no longer give those we serve what they need, and find it hard to stay well, ourselves.



It's also important to acknowledge the grief that educators might feel, including grief at the loss of those in their care, and also grief as they may come to see the disconnects between what they thought their professional roles and workplaces would be, and what they are. These feelings can contribute to moral distress and burnout.

What Can Organizations Do?

There are steps that organizations can take to support staff well-being, which is vital for staff recruitment and retention. First, it's important to recognize that organizational culture plays a large role in de-stigmatizing these experiences and feelings and taking responsibility for a culture of safety and care.



Staff education about vicarious trauma, moral distress and their impacts



Reflective supervision, opportunities for staff-initiated debriefing



Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)



Organization supports for self-care

From Varcoe, C. (2023). Vicarious Trauma, Moral Distress, and Compassion Fatigue/Burnout through a Structural Lens. In: Wathen, C.N., Varcoe, C.M. (Eds). (2023). Implementing Trauma- and Violence-Informed Care: A Handbook. Toronto, University of Toronto Press. ISBN: 9781487529253. Available [here](#)

Steps to Support Educator Well-Being

1 TAKE STOCK of your work environment. Does it increase or decrease the likelihood that vicarious trauma and moral distress will have negative impacts? Consider:

- Does your workload allow you to provide good care, with support?
- How is human suffering acknowledged and dealt with?
- How are educators expected to act in the face of suffering? Tough? Distant? Compassionate?
- How are educators who are struggling described?
 - “burned out” (an individual’s weakness and problem) or,
 - “used up” (by the organizational practices)?



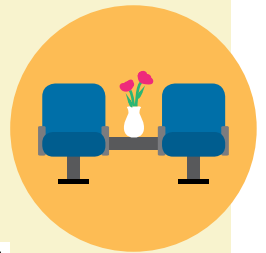
2 BE AWARE of the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma & moral distress, and how to recognize them in yourself and your co-workers.



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

3 DISCUSS with your leaders and co-workers how the organization can better support all staff in being safe and well. While each setting will differ, some things to consider include:

- Are resources such as Employee Assistance Programs available to support staff mental health?
- Is reflective supervision from the Principal or Administrative team formally available?
- Are staff encouraged to debrief informally amongst themselves, perhaps using a “buddy system”?
- How is workplace violence acknowledged and dealt with? Are safety plans developed with staff and service user input available?
- Does the organization support self-care strategies for staff? This can include:
 - Quiet rooms
 - Flexible breaks
 - Encouraging down time & time away when needed
 - Flexible use of extended health benefits for self-care

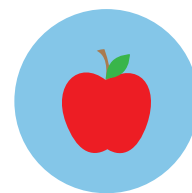


If you're concerned, take a self-test, by clicking [here](#) or using this code:



4 PRACTICE SELF CARE. Whether to prevent or treat vicarious trauma and/or moral distress, self-care is a good idea. If you are not having these experiences currently, take steps to keep yourself well. While everyone is different, here are some ideas:

- Exercise (of any kind)
- Relaxation
- Mindfulness practice
- Meditation
- Healthy diet
- Adequate sleep
- Spending time in nature
- Spending time with friends & family
- Volunteering where you contribute to positive change
- Limiting intake of violent movies/books



How to cite this document:

Wathen, C.N. & Varcoe, C. Trauma- & Violence-Informed Care and Educator Well-Being. EQUIP Healthcare and GTV Incubator. 2023. Available at: gtvincubator.uwo.ca/resources/