



COMPASSION FATIGUE, VICARIOUS TRAUMA, AND BURNOUT

Infosheet for those supporting human rights defenders

It is normal and natural to feel affected by human suffering and the pressures of working in emergency situations – especially if exposed to distressing or graphic material or stories on a regular basis. However, it is important to be able to recognise and respond early on to the signs of psychological impact.

Compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma are two such impacts, and commonly arise in those whose roles involve responding to the suffering of others; they can easily contribute to burnout.

- Compassion fatigue** The physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal that can be experienced by those who care for traumatised people over an extended period of time without being able to recharge.
- Vicarious trauma** A profound shift in worldview that can occur in anyone who continuously engages empathetically with survivors of traumatic incidents.
- Burnout** The slower onset of physical and emotional exhaustion that can result from being powerless, unsatisfied or overwhelmed.

Compassion fatigue







Compassion fatigue is characterised by one's capacity for empathy shutting down – usually after long-term exposure to other people's suffering or long periods of time spent in helping roles. It is often temporary, and can be overcome if properly addressed.






- ⚠️ Feeling numb, shut off or distanced from stories or situations that would usually have generated an empathetic or sympathetic response.
- ⚠️ Exhaustion, loss of purpose or dread around going to work.

- ✓ Take a step back, seek support, and consider your limits.
- ✓ Practice self-care: take breaks, eat regular and nutritious meals, and aim to maintain healthy patterns of sleep and exercise, while staying connected to friends and family.
- ✓ Managers and co-workers can help by making compassion fatigue a safe topic to talk about in the workplace, and by finding practical ways to share heavy workloads within teams.
- ✓ Speak to a healthcare provider or mental health professional as soon as possible if you have any concerns.

Vicarious trauma








Sometimes referred to as secondary trauma, vicarious trauma describes how those who work with traumatised individuals or populations may respond with trauma symptoms of their own. It can lead to a profound change in worldview, and a loss of faith, meaning, and purpose.






-  Strong emotions, which may leave you feeling helpless, despairing or sad. Feelings of guilt and shame – for example, survivor or bystander guilt – are common, as is anger at the injustice or harm others have suffered.
-  Intrusive thoughts or images regarding traumatic material or stories.
-  Exhaustion and susceptibility to aches, pains, and other physical complaints, such as digestive problems or an irregular heartbeat. Changes to sleeping patterns, appetite, and diet may also occur.
-  Emotional numbness or a sense of disconnection from yourself and the surrounding world.
-  Avoidance of uncomfortable feelings or further exposure to trauma may manifest in high levels of sickness or absence from the workplace, or self-medication through alcohol and other substances or other harmful behaviours.
-  You may become overinvolved and feel indispensable, leading to an erosion of boundaries – working beyond your remit and losing a work-life balance.

-  Foster self-compassion and avoid blaming yourself for perceived 'weakness'. Remember that reactions to trauma are usually beyond our conscious control.
-  Practice self-care: take breaks, eat regular and nutritious meals, and aim to maintain healthy patterns of sleep and exercise, while staying connected to friends and family.
-  Managers and co-workers can help by making vicarious trauma a safe topic to talk about in the workplace.
-  Manage your exposure to additional traumatic material or stories. Try to avoid the news if it is likely to feature distressing stories, and avoid films, TV shows, and books with storylines containing violence or suffering.
-  Speak to a healthcare provider or a trauma-informed mental health professional as soon as possible if you have any concerns.

Burnout

Burnout is a state of chronic stress that leads to physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness. Burnout can leave people unable to function on a personal or professional level. Those suffering from burnout may need considerable time off to recuperate physically and psychologically or may not be able to return to work at all.

-  Loss of a sense of control over or meaning or purpose in your work.
-  Feelings of a misalignment between your own values and those you perceive your organisation to be upholding.
-  You may develop a very narrow focus and become preoccupied with your own struggles and perceived failings.
-  Physical and emotional exhaustion may manifest as chronic insomnia, an inability to focus, frequent illness, and high levels of depression and anxiety.
-  Cynicism and detachment may emerge through self-isolation, extreme pessimism, and loss of enjoyment.
-  A sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment may appear as feelings of apathy and hopelessness, increased irritability, lack of productivity, and poor performance.
-  You may seem immobile, passive, and disengaged to others.

-  Explain your symptoms of burnout to your manager, and discuss what changes to workload or working patterns are possible. Ask if you can refocus on tasks and activities that are realistically achievable, that you feel motivated by, and that reflect your personal values.
-  If you are exhausted, take sick leave or annual leave in order to get a break from work.
-  Practice self-care: take breaks, eat regular and nutritious meals, and aim to maintain healthy patterns of sleep and exercise, while staying connected to friends and family.
-  Managers and co-workers can help by modelling healthy practices and avoiding language and behaviour that encourages a burnout culture. They can also make burnout a safe topic to talk about in the workplace, and by finding practical ways to share heavy workloads within teams.
-  Speak to a healthcare provider or a mental health professional as soon as possible if you have any concerns.

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