



# Vicarious Trauma



acacia EAP  
employee assistance program

Phoenix Australia defines vicarious trauma as “the indirect exposure to other people’s trauma such that it has the same harmful effect on our mental health as experiencing trauma directly.”

Vicarious trauma refers to the emotional and psychological stress experienced by individuals who are exposed to the traumatic experiences of others, often through their work or relationships.

This is common in frontline services and helping professions, such as healthcare workers, social workers, emergency personnel, lawyers, call centre staff, or first responders, all who regularly interact with individuals who have experienced trauma.

## Signs and Symptoms

Experiencing vicarious trauma can have various impacts on individuals. Vicarious trauma can lead to feelings of sadness, anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion as individuals absorb the traumatic experiences of others. It can also result in difficulty concentrating, intrusive thoughts related to the trauma, and impaired decision-making abilities.

Physical symptoms, such as fatigue, insomnia, headaches, and stomach issues may occur due to the stress of vicarious trauma.

Repeated exposure to traumatic material can also lead to a shift in one's beliefs about the world, safety, and trust in others.

Vicarious trauma can impact personal relationships due to changes in mood, emotional availability, and coping mechanisms. Individuals may also experience professional consequences, such as burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and impaired job performance.

## PTSD and Vicarious Trauma

While vicarious trauma itself is not PTSD, it can contribute to the development of PTSD-like symptoms. This is sometimes referred to as secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue.

PTSD typically arises from directly experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. Symptoms of vicarious trauma that overlap with those of PTSD include intrusive thoughts, nightmares, avoidance behaviours, and emotional numbness.

If left unaddressed, the cumulative impact of vicarious trauma can potentially lead to the development of PTSD in some individuals. It's crucial for those experiencing vicarious trauma to seek appropriate support and self-care to mitigate the risk of developing PTSD-like symptoms.

The symptoms of PTSD can vary but generally include intrusive memories or avoidance of the traumatic event, negative thoughts, feelings of detachment or estrangement from others, difficulty experiencing positive emotions, and diminished interest in previously enjoyed activities.

Symptoms can also include changes in emotional reactions, such as irritability, angry outbursts, reckless or self-destructive behaviour, and hypervigilance.

Another sign to look out for is if symptoms persist for more than a month and cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Not everyone who experiences trauma develops PTSD, and the severity and duration of symptoms can vary from person to person.

## **Support Yourself Against Vicarious Trauma**

### **Self-Awareness**

Recognise signs of vicarious trauma in oneself, such as emotional distress or changes in behaviour, and acknowledge the need for self-care.

### **Practice Stress Management**

Implement stress-reduction techniques such as deep breathing exercises, meditation, or progressive muscle relaxation to manage stress levels.

### **Establish Self-Care Routines**

Incorporate self-care practices into daily routines to promote physical and emotional wellbeing. This could include regular exercise, spending time with loved ones, healthy eating habits, adequate sleep, and mindfulness or relaxation techniques.



### **Set Boundaries**

Establish clear boundaries between work and personal life to prevent overexposure to traumatic content. Limit exposure to distressing material outside of work hours, if possible.

### **Seek Support**

Connect with colleagues, friends, or a support network to discuss experiences and emotions related to vicarious trauma. Consider seeking professional help, such as support from your EAP, if needed.

### **Manage Workload**

Prioritise tasks and manage workload effectively to prevent burnout and overwhelm. Delegate tasks when possible and communicate with supervisors about workload concerns.

### **Limit Exposure to Triggers**

Identify triggers that exacerbate vicarious trauma symptoms and take steps to limit exposure to them when possible.

### **Seek Professional Development**

Attend workshops, training sessions, or conferences focused on vicarious trauma and self-care strategies to enhance coping skills and resilience.

### **Final Words**

Vicarious trauma can have serious impacts on our wellbeing. Remember that Acacia EAP has a range of qualified and trauma-informed professionals who can support you 24/7.



1800 Respect, 2023, [Work-induced stress and vicarious trauma](#).  
Phoenix Australia, (2024), [Vicarious Trauma](#).