As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to reshape life around the globe it has added new pressures, fears, and giefs to our lives. No matter how our corner of the world is being impacted (or how vigilant we are about avoiding the news) it is practically impossible to miss the suffering 2020 has ushered in for so many people around the world.

Of course, the fact that there is suffering in the world is hardly news to anyone who works in humanitarian relief, development, or advocacy. We see and hear about a lot of suffering and struggle in this line of work. We are all well aware that life is far from fair, and that bad, hard things happen to lots of good people.

Given that experiencing some level of vicarious trauma is practically inevitable in this line of work, it is important to understand how exposure to other people's pain and suffering can challenge and change us. This resource will help you learn more about vicarious trauma and explore these questions:

✓ What is vicarious trauma?
✓ How do we know when we are experiencing it? What are common signs?
✓ What can help buffer you from experiencing vicarious trauma, and recover when you are impacted?

What is vicarious trauma?

Vicarious trauma is a type of stress reaction that arises as the result of witnessing or hearing about other people’s pain and suffering. It is particularly common in the “helping professions” (such as nursing, social work, humanitarian work) where you are seeking to care for other people who have been hurt.

Vicarious trauma (VT) is often talked about as secondary stress or indirect stress, because it is stress you experience as a result of what happens to other people.

Why is it important for humanitarian workers to understand VT?

Humanitarian workers are at increased risk of experiencing VT because of the nature of their work. They are particularly at risk if their role involves being:

✓ Exposed to stories, information, or images of conflict, suffering, loss, abuse, violence, and/or torture.
✓ Socially and emotionally isolated from friends and family.
✓ Under increased stress because of personal experience and/or living and working in difficult or dangerous environments.
✓ Inadequately trained, supervised, and/or supported for the work they are doing.

How (and to what extent) an individual is impacted by vicarious trauma depends on a complex array of professional and personal factors. These include the current constellation of risk and protective factors at play in their lives, and any trauma they may have experienced in the past.
In general, however, local staff are at increased risk for VT because of the high likelihood that they have been personally impacted by disaster or conflict and because they often face increased personal risk in their daily lives. Their background “stress levels” are often high, and they are also more likely to personally know people who have experienced suffering, violence, abuse, etc. However, local staff often benefit significantly from an intact and close-knit social support system outside the workplace, which expatriate workers can lack.

**What are common signs and symptoms of VT?**

Vicarious trauma is a type of stress reaction, and many of the common signs of VT are also general signs of stress. These include:

- Disturbed sleep
- Somatic symptoms such as headaches and unusual body aches
- Feeling irritable, angry, distracted, unable to focus without a clear reason
- Difficulty relaxing and winding down
- More feelings of sadness, grief, helplessness, hopelessness
- Increased use of substances such as alcohol and sleeping medication

However, the signs that differentiate vicarious trauma most uniquely from general cumulative stress or burnout include the following:

**1. Signs of trauma reactions**

You do not have to experience something personally to be affected by it. When you open your mind and heart to someone else’s pain you can be vicariously traumatized by their experiences and develop signs of post-traumatic stress yourself. These can include:

- Increase in intrusive thoughts about distressing material
- Increase in worry/anxiety/rumination
- Heightened startle response and hypervigilance
- Avoidance of distressing material

**2. Changes to sense of meaning, purpose, and spirituality**

Vicarious trauma often has a particular impact on your worldview—your core beliefs and assumptions about the way the world works and life happens. Vicarious trauma frequently challenges and changes your core beliefs about things like:

- How life and the universe works
- The existence and nature of meaning, purpose, God and hope
- Your own identity, roles, and responsibilities in life

Core beliefs/assumptions that are often challenged include:
✓ People are basically good and kind
✓ Bad things do not happen to good people
✓ Things will work out for the best
✓ Justice will be served
✓ Efforts will be recognized and rewarded
✓ What we are doing is worthwhile

Some common ways these changes show up are a loss of sense of meaning, purpose, and hope, and the development of unhelpful levels of cynicism or guilt.

3. Changes in relationships

VT changes how you relate to yourself and others—it influences your ability to feel empathy and compassion, to feel connected to yourself, and to feel connected to other important people in your life. As such, vicarious trauma also influences the way you act and interact with people you love. This affects your family and friends, too. Some of the ways this often shows up include:

✓ Difficulty accepting or feeling okay about yourself. Your sense of relationship with self and others is negatively transformed.
✓ Problems managing the boundaries between yourself and others (e.g., taking on too much responsibility, having difficulty leaving work at the end of the day, trying to step in and control other’s lives).
✓ Reduced ability to feel compassion and empathy.
✓ Difficulty feeling connected to what is going on around and within you.

How can VT show up in behavior?

Vicarious trauma can negatively affect how you feel about yourself, your work, your colleagues, and the overall functioning and effectiveness of the organization. Over time, you can be drawn into patterns with how you relate and react to the work (and to community members and other beneficiaries). Some of these patterns can be unhelpful (to you and to the work).

The table below\(^1\) identifies some of the common patterns that can arise under the influence of vicarious trauma. It is natural to slide back and forth along the continuum over time somewhat, depending on context. However, when you recognize you are in the orange zone it is important to assess and take action.

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\(^1\) Table adapted from *QPASTT (2016) Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Vicarious Trauma.* Queensland Program Of Assistance To Survivors Of Torture and Trauma QPASTT Guidebook.
What can you do to prevent and recover from VT?

Being impacted by vicarious trauma is a predictable outcome of being in a job that is focused on helping others during or after traumatic experiences. So what can you do about this?

Below is a useful framework that can help us identify effective strategies when it comes to preventing and managing vicarious trauma.

1. Consciousness

This first one helps remind us of the importance of being conscious, mindful, and aware of what we are experiencing and how we are reacting over time. When we understand more about VT and how it can influence us, we can become more conscious and aware of how we are reacting and coping. When we can monitor ourselves more effectively, we are better equipped to decide what we need at different points in order to best prevent and address VT. Becoming more conscious and learning to monitor ourselves in an ongoing manner goes a long way towards making sure we do not burn out or unintentionally harm others because of the effects of VT.

2. Connection

Connection is probably our best and strongest buffer against emotional distress. The pandemic is particularly challenging on this front because the things we are being required to do to help control spread are very disruptive to connection with other people.

There are at least two really important aspects to connection:
✓ Connective and supportive relationships to family, friends, colleagues (and pets)
✓ Connection to sources of meaning, purpose, hope, refreshment, perspective

3. Culture

This one acknowledges the power of our environment and the “cultures” that shape our daily lives. In terms of work, culture is about how/whether the culture in the workplace is protective in terms of emotional distress. Two huge parts of culture are effective leadership and good communication. Important questions to consider include:

✓ What is the nature of our work – how much inherent risk of VT does our occupation carry?
✓ How do our workplace and our managers help create a sense of safety, security, support, and comfort?

4. Coping

There are so many self-care and coping strategies we know are helpful – exercise, spending time with loved ones, eating healthy, spending time in nature, mindfulness, using our creativity, doing things that bring us joy and pleasure.

People who are regularly using baseline healthy coping strategies go into high-risk roles and professions (or a global pandemic) with more of an emotional buffer in place. This is important for a couple of different reasons. First, because they are already used to doing things that decrease stress. Secondly, because they tend to have a sense of empowerment that comes from believing that there are things we can do to manage our own emotions and experiences. This sense of empowerment is protective.

Discuss this further...

Why not discuss this further with colleagues and friends? Share this resource with them and use our companion resource Discussion Guide on Vicarious Trauma to discuss your own experiences with each other.