

## **Quick Guide to Vicarious Trauma for Court Staff**

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February 2021

### **Introduction**

Sometimes we as judges, court staff or justice partners hear testimony or see evidence that is difficult to absorb due to its graphic depiction of physical violence, psychological abuse, sexual assault or death. Sometimes the things we see or hear in court can negatively affect our minds, emotions, spirits and bodies. This is called vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma means sometimes we ourselves experience symptoms of trauma even though we are not the ones who experienced the actual trauma. Vicarious trauma can occur as the result of a single difficult hearing or case, or it can occur as the cumulative result of many difficult court hearings or cases.

This quick guide will answer five questions: (1) What is trauma? (2) What is vicarious trauma? (3) How can I tell if I am experiencing vicarious trauma? (4) What steps can I take to avoid or heal from vicarious trauma? And (5) How can I learn more about vicarious trauma?

### **What is trauma?**

Trauma refers to the various physical, mental, and emotional injuries a person may suffer after experiencing a fearful life-threatening or life-altering event. According to the federal Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma may result from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by a person as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening, and that has lasting adverse effects on the person's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being.

When we experience serious fear our brain is flooded with chemicals such as adrenaline which are designed to keep us alive. These chemicals activate the survival part of our brain (the amygdala) which triggers our fight-flight-freeze response, and speed up our metabolism to help us survive the immediate danger. When the danger subsides then our brain is flooded with other chemicals designed to slow down our metabolism and bring us back to normal. But sometimes our brain chemistry gets stuck in high gear and our brain does not quickly return to normal. This produces many normal and predictable symptoms. Just like a sprained ankle will produce predictable physical symptoms, so also trauma will produce predictable symptoms, the difference being they may include mental and emotional symptoms in addition to physical symptoms.

One important thing to know is that everyone reacts to trauma in different ways. And we may react in different ways at different times. Sometimes the physical injury from trauma may be great, but the injury to the mind or emotions is minimal. Other times there may be no physical injury but the mind and emotions may be severely injured. Two people experiencing the same

traumatic event may experience vastly different responses. The good news is that trauma is common and treatable.

### **What is vicarious trauma?**

Vicarious trauma refers to the various mental, emotional, physical and spiritual symptoms a person may suffer NOT because they personally experienced trauma, but because they witnessed or heard about trauma experienced by someone else. This means that sometimes you may experience symptoms of trauma even though you were not the one who experienced the actual traumatic event. Listening to a rape victim tell their story, or viewing graphic images from a crime scene, or reading a police or social worker report about child abuse, can trigger vicarious trauma.

Vicarious trauma is a scientifically-recognized and treatable condition. It is not psychological mumbo-jumbo. Our awareness and understanding of vicarious trauma has grown greatly over the last few decades. First responders are most at risk for vicarious trauma, but any job or profession that requires you to interact with traumatized individuals places you at risk for vicarious trauma. That includes all court staff. If you yourself have personally experienced trauma in the past, you may be more susceptible to experiencing vicarious trauma at the present. Even if you have no history of personal trauma, if the bulk of your days are spent reading or hearing about the trauma others have experienced, then you are more susceptible to experiencing symptoms of vicarious trauma.

Vicarious trauma is often associated with compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress, which are similar and which can occur if your job requires you to help people who have experienced trauma. The good news is that vicarious trauma is common and treatable.

### **How can I tell if I am experiencing vicarious trauma?**

Vicarious trauma makes itself known in different ways. If you have suffered a traumatic event, or if you have been exposed to someone else's trauma, you may experience one or more of the following symptoms. First, and most prevalent, you may find that what you saw or heard or experienced keeps replaying in your mind for days. You may experience racing thoughts or recurrent unwanted distressing thoughts. You may find yourself suddenly having difficulty with concentration or memory.

You may feel an unexplained vague heaviness in your shoulders, chest or gut. You may find yourself experiencing episodic sadness or depression or anxiety or apathy for no apparent reason. You may find yourself feeling moody or overreacting to small irritations. You may experience displaced anger or pessimism. You may find yourself "spacing out" at times. You may experience difficulties with sleep. All of these are common symptoms and should dissipate soon if you follow the steps below.

Longer term signs of untreated trauma or vicarious trauma may include prolonged feelings of darkness, helplessness or hopelessness. You may experience hypervigilance, which means your

mind is stuck on high alert and always focused on the potential dangers around you. You may feel like you are not working hard enough, or that you can never do enough. You may experience diminished creativity and diminished ability to embrace complexity. You may feel disillusioned. You may feel numb or disconnected from others. You may lose motivation. You may experience sudden physical ailments such as headaches, joint pain, digestive problems, high blood pressure, or signs of lowered immunity. You may become more susceptible to addictive behaviors. In rare cases you may experience suicidal thoughts (if so, do not panic, but please call your doctor right away). A robust body of neurobiological research explains why our bodies react in these ways to trauma and vicarious trauma. The good news is that vicarious trauma is common and treatable.

### **What steps can I take to avoid or heal from vicarious trauma?**

The key to healing from vicarious trauma, and well as the key to minimizing the potential impact of vicarious trauma, relates to what researchers call resilience. Resilience refers to your ability to bounce back after experiencing adversity. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress such a family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors.

Research in medicine, neurobiology and psychology has identified a wide variety of activities which stimulate chemicals and activate circuitries in your brain which promote healing and resilience. Most of the time, by doing one or more of these things, you will heal on your own. Here is a short list of evidence-based things you can do to promote resilience:

- **Processing:** Share what you are feeling with a trusted colleague or friend. Talking about it really helps.
- **Sleep:** Increase your sleep time or add naps. Sleep is the most effective tool known to calm and heal the brain. The less sleep you get the more your brain produces stress hormones; the more sleep you get the less your brain produces stress hormones. On average most people need about eight hours of sleep at night. If you think you are experiencing vicarious trauma, try getting some extra sleep for a few days.
- **Mindfulness and meditation:** Practice breathing exercises and other mindful or meditative activities which calm the brain and heart and relax the body. Mindfulness can help reduce negative thoughts while increasing attentiveness. Mindfulness breathing exercises are proven to benefit the mind and body on many different levels.
- **Exercise:** Get some exercise. Exercising and healthy recreation release endorphins which are known to calm and heal the brain. Go for a walk, run, swim, or bike ride, or stretch, or lift weights, or engage in sporting activities which increase your heart rate and get your blood moving. But be careful not to overdo it.

- Nutrition: Increase your consumption of healthy carbs and protein, which together promote brain health. Decrease your consumption of processed sugar and alcohol, which detract from brain health. The food we eat affects brain health.
- Gratitude: Write down on a piece of paper five or more things you are thankful for today. The simple act of focusing for a moment on the things for which you are thankful releases healthy chemicals in your brain.
- Healthy relationships: Spend time with supportive and encouraging family and friends. Positive connections with others is a key resiliency factor.
- Sound: Listen to soothing music or soothing sounds. Or find a place where you can enjoy silence.
- Smell: Light a fragrance candle that you enjoy or bake a food you like to smell. Research in the field of aromatherapy suggests that scent molecules travel quickly to the emergency operations center in your brain (the amygdala).
- Laughter: Read, listen or watch things that make you laugh. It has been said that a minute of laughter boosts the immune system for a day while a minute of anger weakens the immune system for a day. Laughter releases endorphins which reduce anxiety and depression, promote relaxation, and lower blood pressure.
- Spirituality: Participate in religious or spiritual activities which help you connect with others and cultivate a broader perspective on life. Research shows that spirituality is associated with increased resiliency.
- Hope: Think about and do things which cultivate hope for your future. Hope is a powerful resilience factor.
- Volunteer: Help others who are in need. Altruistic activities have been shown to promote brain resilience and healing.

Finally, sometimes the mental or emotional pain is too strong to heal on your own and you need to talk to a professional counselor. There is no shame in doing this. If you suffer a severe sprained ankle, you think nothing of seeing a doctor to get it checked. The same thing applies to your brain, which is the most complex organ in your body. You would be surprised at the number of people around you who see a counselor occasionally or regularly to help address mental and emotional pain. Please talk to your doctor right away if things are not getting better.

### **How can I learn more about trauma and vicarious trauma?**

There are many good books available on vicarious trauma. For a concise online summary please see United States Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime, What is Vicarious Trauma? at <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-vicarious-trauma>.

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