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# **How to Deal with Vicarious Trauma**

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# What are we going to be talking about?

The definition of vicarious trauma:

- The emotional and psychological impact experienced from exposure to another person's traumatic experiences,
- *even when you are not directly involved.*
- Anyone who engages empathetically with survivors of traumatic incidents, and material relating to their trauma, is potentially affected.

## What's the problem?

This is not simply stress at work due to overwork (or under appreciation):

- What kind of cases are likely to trigger vicarious trauma?
- What kind of lawyers develop vicarious trauma?
  - Empathetic ones!
  - Recognising your own circumstances – age, gender, life circumstances, life events.
  - It's different for everyone. There is no 'right' response to trauma.

## What are the warning signs?

The early signs of vicarious trauma:

- Becoming overly involved emotionally with the client.
- Over identification with the client (having horror and rescue fantasies).
- Being preoccupied with thoughts of the client outside the work situation.
- Difficulty in maintaining professional boundaries with the client, such as overextending yourself (trying to do more than is in the role to help the client).

## What are the warning signs?

The early signs of vicarious trauma:

- Distancing, numbing, detachment, cutting clients off, staying busy. Avoiding listening to the client's story of their traumatic experiences.
- Experiencing bystander guilt, shame, feelings of self-doubt.
- Experiencing lingering feelings of anger, rage and sadness about a case.
- Loss of hope, pessimism, cynicism.

## Some long term effects

The long term effects can be debilitating:

- Flashbacks, nightmares, panic attacks.
- Hyperarousal and anxiety.
- Dissociation.
- Sleep disturbance and intrusive thoughts.
- Low self esteem and grief.
- Self harm, including substance abuse and maladaptive behaviours.

## Coping strategies

Avoidance:

- You do not have to do this.
  - Not everyone wants to do traumatic work. That's ok.
  - Not everyone wants to stay in the profession forever. That's ok too.
  - Front line work is not for everyone.
  - Trauma is cumulative. You may find that taking time out is helpful.

Before you make any decisions, try some coping strategies....

## Coping strategies

Ways of working:

- Learn what triggers you and prepare mentally to deal with those cases.
- Remind yourself of the limits of your work and why you do it.
- Try having a mantra:  
I am strong, I am prepared, and I can deal with this case and then put it to one side.
- Limit the time spent on any particular traumatic task. Take breaks and step away from the material.
- Alternate with other tasks.

## Coping strategies

Ways of working:

- As well as keeping the material limited in terms of time, limit it in terms of space – be able to walk away from it.
- Try not to deal with traumatic cases at the end of the day or the week.
- Create a buffer between work and home life – a virtual commute, a ritual, or (for the English) a cup of tea.
- Keep reminding yourself of the limitations on what you are expected to do – you are a lawyer, not a magician.
- Remember – you are not responsible for your client.

## Coping strategies

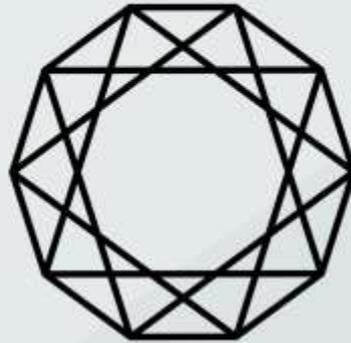
### Self care:

- Improve your self observation. Recognise the signs of trauma, stress and burnout.
- Take breaks. Develop relaxing hobbies and pastimes. This is a necessity, not an indulgence.
- Hydration, nutrition, exercise, relaxation.
- Holidays and time away from the working environment.
- Sleep **SLEEP SLEEP.**

## Coping strategies

Mutual support from colleagues:

- Check in with colleagues and friends – when you’re about to deal with something traumatic, and when you know they are.
- Debrief with a buddy.
- Consider creating a space for regular check ins: It’s Friday, and Friday is Feelings Day...
- Ask for support. It’s not a weakness. I guarantee the more experienced lawyers have been through it and have the scars to prove it. Communicate with them.
- Therapy. It’s brilliant.



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