

## Factsheet: **Vicarious Trauma**

Some lawyers work with vulnerable or traumatised clients and this will often involve hearing or reading an account from a client about something bad happening in their life. The gravity of the problem might range from something that hasn't happened yet - a request for advice for some possible future occurrence - to a life-changing accident or the death of a loved one. Lawyers are problem-solvers, so this can be stressful, but those lawyers who regularly deal with particularly traumatic accounts and experiences are at risk of experiencing vicarious trauma.

### What is vicarious trauma?

The term vicarious trauma encompasses the wide range of potential negative effects of being immersed in trauma day-to-day at work. These effects might include the following symptoms:

- ▶ intrusive thoughts
- ▶ panic attacks
- ▶ sleep disturbance
- ▶ memory loss
- ▶ being unable to engage with client material or the news
- ▶ finding it hard to concentrate
- ▶ being irritable for no apparent reason
- ▶ a shift in how you view the world, seeing it as an inherently dark or dangerous place
- ▶ burn out - the inability to cope at home or at work

Although you do not experience the trauma directly, you can experience the same effects as your clients, including a sense of profound guilt. Your clients may feel guilty for surviving or for allowing the trauma to happen when it is not their fault. You as the lawyer may feel guilty for experiencing these symptoms when it is your clients who have experienced the trauma, not you. This guilt might even prevent you from seeking help.

One of the most difficult aspects of vicarious trauma is the sense of hopelessness that can follow. This makes it particularly hard for lawyers to identify clearly the impact on themselves personally or to take action. Vicarious trauma is not a personal failing; it arises in the context of a myriad of contributing factors: caseload, personal experience, empathy, availability of a supportive network, political and social climates, to name a few.

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### **Tips for managing vicarious trauma**

By simply acknowledging the inevitable effect of working with some of the cases that you do, you can help reduce the severity of the impact. To do this you need space and time within your legal practice to reflect, to share experiences with peers and senior colleagues, and to learn techniques to improve how you cope with the effects. Together these approaches can reduce the stigma and shame around vicarious trauma, will help those struggling, and will improve legal practice overall.

Lawyers cannot and should not have to cope with vicarious trauma alone. However, there are some positive practices that individuals can adopt:

#### **Reflection**

Allow some space and time within your schedule to reflect on your own practice, either individually or in groups.

#### **Mindfulness**

There is strong scientific evidence that higher levels of mindfulness are linked to lower levels of vicarious trauma. Check out the **Headspace** website [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com) or app, or **Insight Timer** app for more information.

#### **Looking after yourself**

Self-care is not self-indulgence. If every day you are supporting survivors of trauma, it is imperative that you take care of yourself too. Exercise, a good diet, sleep, and having friends and activities outside of the legal world are all vital. These things are sometimes easier said than done, but taking time in the day to recharge is vital to make the important work lawyers do sustainable.

#### **Professional help**

Requesting more formal support for your mental health from your GP is important particularly if you are also dealing with your own trauma history. It's also important to speak to your employer who should have policies in place to address the impact of vicarious trauma in your work. Counselling may be available through your employer's Employment Assistance Programme or your private medical insurance.

### **Vicarious Resilience**

Lawyers who work with survivors of trauma will know that these clients are often brave, compassionate and determined people. So, just as you can sometimes absorb the sadness and stress of your clients' experiences, you can also take comfort and benefit from them too. This is sometimes called vicarious resilience (and sometimes post-traumatic growth).

This factsheet was written by **Claiming Space** [www.claiming.space](http://www.claiming.space), an organisation offering training for lawyers working with vulnerable populations.

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