

# Understanding & Addressing Vicarious Trauma: Reading Course



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**ONLINE TRAINING MODULE FOUR**

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*The information contained in these modules is provided solely for educational purposes. The self-examination exercises and scales on this website are not intended to be used as diagnostic or treatment tools. Any concerns you might have about mental health issues should be discussed with a qualified mental health professional. If any of the material in this module raises concerns for you, please contact the Headington Institute staff or other appropriately qualified mental health professionals.*

## INTRODUCTION | *Understanding & Addressing Vicarious Trauma*

“I knew nothing about self-care, secondary traumatization [vicarious trauma], or burnout...I think it is unfortunate that both the French and US NGO’s I worked for did not educate us more about such things. Instead, I wondered why I was so irritable and tired all the time, and dreaded hearing one more tragic story.... I saw too many of my fellow relief workers get totally burned out. I am certain that if they had been more reassured that their reactions were mostly normal, they would have known how to cope, rather than internalize their reactions, leading to depression. Being more knowledgeable can help enormously.”

— Maria, working in Bosnia (Blaque - Belair, 2002, p. 201 )

People decide to become humanitarian workers for many different reasons. Some come to this work because of a personal commitment to social change – perhaps to follow a spiritual path or to fulfill a calling. Some want adventure; others want to leave home. People usually come to humanitarian work expecting exciting challenges, meaningful work, and the chance to make a difference in the world. Few people really understand that it is likely that their lives will be changed forever by their experiences.

Humanitarian workers often assist people who have been victimized. They work in and with communities that have been devastated by natural forces or conflict. They themselves are sometimes the targets of violence. As a result of all these things, humanitarian workers are likely to experience lasting psychological and spiritual changes in the way that they see themselves and the world. Some of these changes can be positive. Humanitarian workers often talk about how witnessing (and sometimes sharing in) the sufferings of people they are there to help has led to personal changes they appreciate – such as more compassion and gratitude, and a deeper understanding of what they value in their own lives and why.

However, some of the changes that can come from witnessing and experiencing suffering can be more problematic, leaving potentially permanent scars. Humanitarian workers also talk of how their work can sometimes leave them feeling numb, disconnected, isolated, overwhelmed, and depressed. Many talk of how their deepest spiritual beliefs have been challenged by their work. While some feel their faith (however they define that) has been strengthened by the work, some feel they lose their faith or spiritual grounding as a result of things they see as a humanitarian worker.

Most simply put, vicarious trauma can be thought of as the negative changes that happen to humanitarian workers over time as they witness and engage with other people’s suffering and need. This training module explores some of the strategies that can help you recognize, reduce, and transform the negative changes that come from vicarious trauma in your life.

If you are a humanitarian worker, it is important to understand the process of vicarious trauma, because it will almost certainly impact you in some way. But that's not all. It will also impact your family, your organization, and the people you are working to help. Every humanitarian worker should understand and recognize vicarious trauma and know how to help reduce and address it. Knowledge (about the process of vicarious trauma) and action (healthy self-care and work habits) work together to protect your well-being. This means that you can remain happier, healthier, and more effective in your work. This benefits not only you, but your family, your colleagues, and those you assist.

**This module aims to help you:**

1. Understand the process of vicarious trauma
2. Recognize signs of vicarious trauma
3. Learn strategies to help address vicarious trauma

**By the end of the module you should be able to answer questions like:**

- What is vicarious trauma?
- What are things that put you most at risk for vicarious trauma?
- What are common signs of vicarious trauma?
- What helps? How can you address vicarious trauma by taking care of yourself and working protectively?
- What can organizations and managers do to help?

This module is an introduction to the topic of vicarious trauma and humanitarian work. It provides an overview so that you can learn about this at your own pace. It also includes links and references to other resources on this topic. After you are finished, you may want to read other Headington Institute training modules.

Additional online modules provided by Headington Institute include:

- [Understanding and Coping with Traumatic Stress \(series introduction\)](#)
- [Trauma and Critical Incident Care for Humanitarian Workers](#)
- [Understanding and Coping with Travel Stress and Re-Entry](#)
- Additional modules on the topics of thriving, spirituality, and more on our [Resources Page](#).

Don't try to rush through this material. You don't have to read it all at once. We recommend you make time to think carefully about this and how it might apply to you. To help with that we have included "Think about..." questions in boxes that look like this...

### Think about...

- **Taking the time to answer these questions will help you get the most out of this module!**
- You can answer these questions just by thinking about them, but we recommend you discuss your answers with other people you trust. Discussing this material with other people will probably help you think more deeply about it and learn from others.
- You can also write down your answers. Studies have shown that writing can be very good for physical and emotional health. It can also create a greater sense of commitment to follow through on addressing your own vicarious trauma. Finally, writing your answers will create a record for you that can help you set self-care goals and complete the action plan at the end of this module.
- When you downloaded this reading course, you were also given a **Reflections Question Workbook** which is a fillable PDF document containing all the reflection (Think about...) questions in this module with space for you to make personal notes.

At the end of the module, complete the action plan in the last section. This will help you identify ways to get started with (or to continue) the ongoing work of supporting yourself and others as you undertake the life- changing work of humanitarian assistance.

## PART ONE | What is Vicarious Trauma?

Most simply put, vicarious trauma can be thought of as the negative changes that happen to humanitarian workers over time as they witness other people's suffering and need. While many humanitarian workers are changed positively by their experiences, here we focus on the negatives. These negative changes are the cost of caring for and caring about others who have been hurt. We could therefore define vicarious trauma this way:

**Vicarious trauma is the process of change that happens because you care about other people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them. Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being.**

### Think about...

- Looking at the definition, what questions do you have about vicarious trauma?

Now, let's take that definition apart and look at each element for a deeper understanding of how vicarious trauma relates to humanitarian work.

### Vicarious trauma is a process of change

Vicarious trauma is a process that unfolds over time. It is not just your responses to one person, one story, or one situation. It is the **cumulative** effect of contact with survivors of violence or disaster or people who are struggling. It is what happens to you over time as you witness cruelty and loss and hear distressing stories, day after day, and year after year.

This process of change is **ongoing**. Your experiences of vicarious trauma are continuously being influenced by your life experiences (both those you choose and those that simply happen to you in the course of your professional and personal lives). This is an important point because it provides hope: as the process of vicarious trauma unfolds, there are many opportunities along the way to recognize the impact your work is having on you and to think about how to protect and care for yourself while doing that work.

***Vicarious trauma is an ongoing process of change over time that results from witnessing or hearing about other people's suffering and need.***

### Think about...

- What are some ways you have changed over time because of your work?

### *Vicarious trauma happens because you care about people who have been hurt.*

Vicarious trauma happens because you care – because you empathize with people who are hurting.

**Empathy** is the ability to identify with another person, to understand and feel another person's pain and joy.

Empathy doesn't mean feeling exactly what someone else is feeling. Everyone is unique. Everyone has his or her own personal history, personality, and life circumstances. You cannot ever feel exactly what someone else is feeling. But to a certain extent (and more effectively in some cases than others), when you care, you can relate to other people's experiences, reactions, and feelings. And when you care about and identify with the pain of people who have endured terrible things, you bring their grief, fear, anger, and despair into your own awareness and experience and feel it along with them in some way.

*When you identify with the pain of people who have endured terrible things,  
you bring their grief, fear, anger, and despair into your own awareness and experience.*

### Think about...

- What sort of problems or people do you find it especially easy to empathize with?
- What are some ways that caring about people who have been hurt affects you?

### **Vicarious trauma happens not only because you care about people who have been hurt, but because you feel committed or responsible to help.**

At its core, the point of humanitarian work is to serve and collaborate with people who need help. Humanitarian workers do that in many different ways. Some work as advocates; some help provide food, shelter, sanitation, or medical services; some work in community or economic development, or peace-building.



Whatever your particular role, as a humanitarian worker you are in the business of helping people who may have experienced terrifying violence and profound losses. Many of these people are desperate and some have lost hope. Humanitarian workers assume a heavy responsibility by showing up and conveying the message, “I’m here to help. There is hope.”

Many humanitarian workers are very committed to their work and take this responsibility very deeply. This is not necessarily a bad thing! However, feeling deeply committed and responsible can contribute to the process of vicarious trauma. It can lead to very high (and sometimes unrealistic) expectations of yourself and others, and for the results you want to see from your work. For example, you may take it personally when your work or the work of your organization doesn’t have the impact you want. Ironically, your sense of commitment and responsibility can eventually contribute to you feeling burdened, overwhelmed, and hopeless in the face of great need and suffering. It can also lead you to extend yourself beyond what is reasonable for your own well- being or the best long-term interests of beneficiaries.

*Your commitment and sense of responsibility can lead to high expectations and eventually contribute to your feeling burdened, overwhelmed, and perhaps  
hopeless.*

### Think about...

- *How does your sense of commitment and responsibility to your work help you?*
- *Are there ways in which your sense of commitment and responsibility to your work might hurt you? How?*

### Over time, vicarious trauma leads to changes in your own psychological and spiritual well- being.

Vicarious trauma is the result of opening up your heart and mind to the worst in human experience - natural and human-made disasters, and human cruelty. When you witness the suffering of people you care about and feel responsible to help, over time this can change the way that you see yourself, the world, and what matters to you. These challenges can change your **spirituality** (your deepest sense of meaning and purpose, hope and faith).



A key component of vicarious trauma is **changes in spirituality**. Not all of the spiritual changes that come from humanitarian work are negative! Many humanitarian workers feel they have grown and matured as the result of things they have seen and experienced. You may feel you gain a broader and more balanced perspective on life and end up better able to understand and empathize with others.

However, witnessing disasters, violence, and suffering can challenge your spirituality in less positive ways. You can come to question your deepest beliefs about the way life and the universe work, and the existence and nature of meaning and hope. Humanitarian workers often use the phrase “existential angst” to refer to their sense that they are constantly being pushed out of their comfort zone and forced to question the meaning of events, and their own and others’ actions and reactions.

*A key component of vicarious trauma is changes in spirituality. Vicarious trauma, like experiencing trauma directly, can deeply impact the way you see the world and your deepest sense of meaning and hope.*

### Think about...

- What are two ways you feel your work has had a positive influence on the way you see the world, yourself, or what matters to you (your sense of meaning and purpose, hope and faith)?
- What are two ways you feel your work has had a negative influence on the way you see the world, yourself, or what matters to you (your sense of meaning and purpose, hope and faith)?

### So, what should you do about vicarious trauma?

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? Looking at the definition we’ve just discussed, you might be thinking about several options. Should you try to stop caring so much – stop empathizing with people who are hurting? Should you stop feeling committed and responsible? Should you quit your job?

Those are options, but there are better options!

Simply understanding more about vicarious trauma is a great first step. This will help you decide what you need in order to best prevent and address your vicarious trauma. Learning to be aware of and address vicarious trauma in an ongoing manner goes a long way toward making sure you don't burn out or feel crushed by vicarious trauma, or unintentionally harm others because of its effects.

The rest of this module will help you understand more about vicarious trauma and yourself. The next section looks at **risk factors for vicarious trauma** and will help you figure out what might be contributing to your vicarious trauma. The section after that looks at **signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma** and will help you figure out what your early warning signs of vicarious trauma are.

Understanding these things provides many avenues to doing something constructive about vicarious trauma. The last half of this module explores **how to address vicarious trauma, and what organizations and managers can do to help**.

*With appropriate tools, humanitarian workers and organizations can better understand, prevent, and address vicarious trauma. Being beaten down by vicarious trauma isn't inevitable, but having to address it constantly is.*

## **PART TWO | *Risk factors for vicarious trauma***

Risk factors are realities that make you more vulnerable to experiencing vicarious trauma, or experiencing more severe vicarious trauma. Understanding what your personal risk factors are will make it easier to identify what might help you prevent or address vicarious trauma. So before we look in more detail at signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma, or how to cope with it, we are going to explore some issues that may be putting you at risk.

Vicarious trauma arises from an interaction between you and your living and working situation, all in a cultural context (see the box below). Anything that gets in the way of you fulfilling your commitment to help those in need can put you at risk of vicarious trauma. The following can all play an important role in this process:

THE HUMANITARIAN WORKER	THE SITUATION	THE CULTURAL CONTEXT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Personality and coping style</li><li>● Personal history</li><li>● Current life circumstances</li><li>● Social support</li><li>● Spiritual resources</li><li>● Work style</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Professional role, work setting, and exposure</li><li>● Agency support</li><li>● Affected population's responses and reactions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Cultures of intolerance</li><li>● Cultural styles of expressing distress and extending and receiving assistance</li><li>● The culture of humanitarian work</li></ul>

Below, we briefly discuss each of the personal, professional, and situational risk factors that we have listed above. There is a lot of information in this section, so take your time. As you read, think about how each of these applies to your situation. Remember:

- Everyone is different, so what contributes to your experience of vicarious trauma may not affect someone else in the same way; and
- Vicarious trauma is a dynamic process – the factors that are most problematic for you today may be different from what will affect you most tomorrow.

*Anything that gets in the way of fulfilling your responsibility or commitment to help those affected by disaster or violence can contribute to your vicarious trauma.*

## The humanitarian worker

### Personality and coping styles

How you experience and process your feelings about the pain and suffering of those affected by violence and disaster will significantly influence your experience of vicarious trauma. You might think that the solution to being hurt by empathizing with other people's pain is to try to avoid paying attention to others' pain (or your own) altogether. Yet this is problematic. While cutting themselves off from their emotions may be a useful survival strategy for some people in times of crisis, it is not effective as a long-term coping strategy. Emotions that are not acknowledged (even if only to oneself) and experienced tend to build up over time.

If you either shut down completely to protect yourself from others' suffering, or you take home all of their pain and let it build inside like a smoldering volcano, you can have big problems in the long run.

Research on stress and coping suggests that Vicarious Trauma will be more problematic for people who tend to avoid problems or difficult feelings, blame others for their difficulties, or withdraw from others when things get hard. On the other hand, people who are able to ask for support, who try to understand themselves and others, and who actively try to solve their problems may be less susceptible to severe vicarious trauma.

*Vicarious Trauma may be more problematic for people who tend to avoid problems or difficult feelings, blame others for their difficulties, or withdraw from others when things get hard.*

### Personal history

*"Everyone reacts according to their background and experience. You see a refugee who looks like your grandmother, then you are worse off than the man next to you who doesn't. You need to be open to that. Our experiences sometimes help us through, sometimes they hit us from a strange angle we didn't expect or understand."*

— Christen Halle ( Quoted in Danieli, 2002, p.17)

Research has produced mixed findings on the question of whether people who have experienced personal trauma themselves are more susceptible to vicarious trauma. It seems possible that people who (because of their own histories) identify more closely with a particular type of pain or loss others have experienced will more readily imagine, or even remember, such losses happening to themselves. As a result they may be more vulnerable to experiencing more problematic vicarious trauma and distress related to their own personal trauma histories.

This risk factor may be especially relevant for national staff, as national staff have often survived the same events and suffered similar losses as those they are assisting. In addition, those with a personal trauma history who are (consciously or unconsciously) using humanitarian work primarily to seek their own recovery instead of engaging in personal healing processes, may have a harder time with Vicarious Trauma.

*Those who have experienced trauma themselves may identify more closely with particular types of pain or loss others have experienced, and may be more vulnerable to experiencing vicarious trauma.*

### **Current life circumstances**

Added stress in other areas of your life can make you more vulnerable to vicarious trauma. If, for example, someone you love is ill, your partner has just lost his job, you are experiencing lots of changes you can't control, and you are worried about money, then you will be less able to perform your best at work. Stress and competing needs in your life accumulate and can make it more challenging to take care of yourself while also working effectively and compassionately with those you are helping.

*Added stress in other areas of your life can make you more vulnerable to vicarious trauma.*

### **Social support**

Everyone who works with people or communities that have been harmed or traumatized, whether at home or abroad, will at times find it difficult to describe to friends or family the nature and challenges of this sort of work. Not having people to talk to who know you and care about your welfare can be a special problem for humanitarian workers who are living and working far from home. However, even if your friends and family are nearby, it's easy to feel (and it may be true) that they simply won't understand, and it can be tempting not to reach out to them. And some elements of the work may be confidential, so it can be challenging to discuss it even with close friends and family. However, research strongly suggests that social isolation puts you at increased risk for developing Vicarious Trauma.

*Lack of good social support puts you at increased risk for vicarious trauma.*

### **Spiritual resources**

You are more likely to find vicarious trauma problematic if you don't have a connection with a source of meaning, purpose, and hope. Without this, humanitarian workers do not have a context for comprehending the terrible events they encounter in their work. Even with such a context, many face an ongoing struggle to make sense of the violence, disasters, and cruelty they witness.

*A lack of connection with a source of meaning, purpose, and hope is a risk factor for developing more problematic vicarious trauma.*

### **Work style**

The way you work and the ways you think about your work contribute to your experiences of vicarious trauma. For example, not managing boundaries appropriately and holding unrealistic expectations of yourself and those you are helping or working with may contribute to vicarious trauma. Working protectively, a topic we address later in the module, is essential.

*Unsustainable professional and work-life boundaries and unrealistic ideals and expectations about work can contribute to more problematic vicarious trauma.*

### **Think about...**

- What are three "individual risk factors" that may be placing you at risk of experiencing vicarious trauma at present?
- What are three things in your life related to you as an individual that you feel help protect you from vicarious trauma? We can call these "individual protective factors."

## The situation

### Professional role, work setting, and exposure

People in different jobs experience different demands, constraints, and priorities. Each situation has its challenges. All of these factors can compromise your ability to do your job well, and may contribute to vicarious trauma. For example:

- **Field staff** often work in very difficult conditions, sometimes without basic sanitation or other resources. They may be quartered in locations where their physical safety depends on living in compounds, which can severely restrict socializing, exercise, and other opportunities for relaxation after hours. They may feel isolated from their friends and family and face frustrations with communications and inadequate resources for their work. They are frequently exposed to the aftermath of violence and disaster and overwhelming levels of direct need, with little time and few opportunities to process their responses.
- **Staff based in headquarters offices**, particularly in the West, may experience chronic stress related to balancing the competing demands of budgets, donors, staff, and dividing inadequate resources among desperate beneficiaries. They may also struggle to balance the demands of their work with those of their family and other commitments.
- **National staff** may have been directly impacted by the disaster or violence, and daily have to return to the work of rebuilding their own lives. They may also be supporting their extended family and friends in the face of limited job security. Those who work for international NGOs may also face discrimination and other risks because of their association with the NGO.
- **Expatriate staff** are frequently working in cultures quite different from their own, and far from the comforts and routines of home as well as family and friends. Isolation, long working hours, frequent travel, and working in cultures and with teams that are unfamiliar to them can compromise their ability to function at their best.

In general, however, research suggests that humanitarian workers who have more exposure to trauma survivors are likely to experience more problematic vicarious trauma. This means that the following job-related factors are probably all significant risk factors for vicarious trauma:

- Working directly with more people in need (beneficiaries)
- Hearing more distressing stories and/or witnessing more distressing scenes or events;
- Being in a position of responsibility and/or feeling responsible for more people, while also feeling as if you do not have the control or resources you need to do your job well; and
- Working longer engagements or moving from one challenging assignment to the next without adequate rest and processing in between.



*Different situations present different challenges. However, research suggests that humanitarian workers who have more exposure to trauma survivors are likely to experience more problematic vicarious trauma.*

### **Agency support**

Humanitarian workers who work with organizations that don't support their staff well enough may also be at greater risk for more problematic vicarious trauma. The following are some agency-related risk factors for worker vicarious trauma:

- Agencies that work as top-down hierarchies (with little opportunity for those at lower levels to communicate their concerns, get the latest accurate information on the agency's priorities and policies, or influence important decisions);
- Agencies that ignore the demanding nature of this work and do not work to create a supportive organizational culture; and
- Agencies that don't provide adequate time off and/or that overwork staff chronically.

*Humanitarian organizations that don't foster an organizational culture of effective management, open communication, and good staff care, increase their staffs' risk of vicarious trauma.*

### **Affected population's responses and reactions**

Many people whom humanitarian workers work with have been directly or indirectly affected by disasters, emergencies, violence, or chronic conditions of deprivation or injustice. When these events occur, especially when they are severe or chronic, people must adapt. This is natural — when things change, your mind, body, and behavior adjust over time to cope with the new reality. Sometimes these adjustments are healthy (e.g., when you talk to a friend when you feel lonely and isolated). Sometimes the adjustments are not as healthy (e.g., when you use alcohol and drugs to numb your anxiety or to help you sleep).

In response to experiencing violence or loss people can develop unhealthy styles of relating that can be challenging for those around them. Traumatic events are traumatic partly because they are often unexpected, and the people affected feel like they have lost control of their lives and what is happening to them. After a traumatic event people often feel insecure and can have trouble trusting, feeling connected to, or respecting others. As a natural counterbalance to the sense of losing control, people who have been through traumatic events can also feel an increased need to try to control their surroundings, including the people around them.

These types of adjustments that can happen after traumatic events can impact all of a person's relationships. In the context of humanitarian work this means that when humanitarian workers show up, the people they want to help sometimes react with mistrust, a sense of distance, and a lack of gratitude or even cooperation that can be bewildering to the humanitarian workers. These dynamics can lead to frustration, annoyance, and anger in the workers, who are just trying to do their jobs. The humanitarian workers may end up feeling misunderstood, unacknowledged, unappreciated, or manipulated. Over time, after many encounters like this, the humanitarian worker may start to feel cynical, abused and hopeless. All of this can be part of the process of vicarious trauma.

*People who have experienced traumatic events can react and interact in ways that the humanitarian workers can find frustrating and bewildering. Over time this can contribute to humanitarian workers experiences of vicarious trauma.*

### Think about...

- What are three situational risk factors that may currently be placing you at risk for vicarious trauma?
- What are three situational protective factors that may currently be helping protect you from experiencing vicarious trauma?
- Jot down any thoughts about new ways you may understand some of your past experiences as a result of what you have read. What was the situation? How did you respond? How did others involved respond? What is your new understanding?

## The cultural context

### Culture of intolerance

There are many broader cultural factors that can influence your experience of vicarious trauma. Three important ones are:

- Society's attitudes about traumatic events and those involved;
- Society's attitudes about different groups within the society;
- Society's attitudes about humanitarian workers and assistance in general.

Sexism, racism, injustice, intolerance, and ethnic hatred are part of the fabric of many societies. Working toward reclaiming dignity and hope is very difficult in a culture that devalues certain groups (e.g., rape victims). Humanitarian workers may feel that in environments like this, they will not be able to address or overcome some of these deep-seated attitudes present in the broader cultural context no matter what they do. At least in the short-term, this may be an accurate assessment, and it can cause humanitarian workers to deeply question their sense of meaning, purpose, and the effectiveness of their efforts. All of this can contribute to vicarious trauma.

Societies also differ in how and whether they value humanitarian relief and development work. When humanitarian workers feel unwelcome or are generally perceived as part of the problem, their chances of experiencing more problematic vicarious trauma increase.

*Cultural attitudes of intolerance can increase a humanitarian workers' risk of experiencing vicarious trauma in a variety of ways.*

### **Cultural styles of expressing distress and extending and receiving assistance**

The ways in which we typically express distress and extend or ask for support are greatly influenced by the culture we grew up in. Humanitarian workers who are working in cultures that have very different communication styles than what they are used to will find extra challenges in their work. It may be difficult to understand what people need or expect, and equally difficult for you to convey how you can help. Each culture also has its own ways of showing appreciation. It may not be clear how or whether co-workers and beneficiaries are responding to you, and you may find yourself feeling frustrated, offended, or confused by daily interactions. Feeling offended can be a common cross-cultural experience, and one that can leave you (as well as those you are trying to help) feeling misunderstood or devalued.

*Not understanding cross-cultural differences in expressing distress and extending and receiving assistance can contribute to an increased risk of vicarious trauma.*

### **The culture of humanitarian work**

*"They go out as naïve youngsters, into a mythological world that's full of clichés and try to live up to those. That can destroy you, unless you catch on quickly."*

— Paul McEnroe

(Lecture at International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, November 5, 2006)

Just as societies, countries, and families have their own cultures, so too do professions. These professional cultures are identified by their language, norms, practices, traditions, and so forth. Humanitarian assistance has its own culture.

All humanitarian workers know that they don't completely fit the common stereotypes of "cowboy" and/or "saint" that are generally applied to humanitarian workers. However this profession is often characterized by self-neglect, toughing it out, risk-taking, and denial of personal needs. Such a culture is very different from one that suggests that helping promote staff wellness is the most effective and ethical way to help others.

Humanitarian workers or agencies that cherish or promote the myths of self-reliance and machismo make it very challenging to name or address vicarious trauma. If staff feel they will be ignored, devalued, ridiculed, demoted, or fired, they will not openly seek the resources needed to understand and address their Vicarious Trauma.

*Humanitarian work as a profession is often characterized by self-neglect, toughing it out, risk-taking, and denial of personal needs. All of these can contribute to more severe vicarious trauma.*

## **PART THREE | *Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma***

### **Vicarious trauma: What happens to you?**

The challenges that come from opening up your heart and mind to other people's suffering can trigger personal growth and a greater appreciation for your blessings. However, these challenges can also be so demanding that they cause some reactions similar to those experienced by people who have undergone traumatic events. Sometimes, both are true.

This section outlines some of the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma. In broad terms, some common difficulties associated with vicarious trauma include:

- Difficulty managing your emotions;
- Difficulty accepting or feeling okay about yourself;
- Difficulty making good decisions;
- 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);
- Problems in relationships;
- Physical problems such as aches & pains, illnesses, accidents;
- Difficulty feeling connected to what's going on around and within you.
- Loss of meaning and hope.

Probably no one will experience difficulties in all of these areas. You saw in the last section that there are individual differences in what contributes to your vicarious trauma, and there are also individual differences in how you experience and express vicarious trauma. One person may primarily experience vicarious trauma physically — through illness, pains, trouble sleeping, etc. Another may primarily show vicarious trauma in relationships — by withdrawing from others or being irritable. For others, vicarious trauma may express itself in mood — through depression or anxiety. The way we experience stress and distress is also influenced by our cultures.

***Vicarious trauma results from psychological and spiritual disruptions that affect the way we see ourselves, the world, and what matters most to us. This leads to physical, psychological, spiritual, relational, and behavioral signs of vicarious trauma.***

The following table lists some common signs of vicarious trauma in different areas. Remember that these difficulties can often result from different problems as well — they are not always due to vicarious trauma. For example, a person might have trouble sleeping because of depression, or physical pain, or many other reasons.

<p><b>CHANGES IN WORLDVIEW OR FRAME OF REFERENCE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Changes in spirituality</b> (e.g., changes in beliefs regarding meaning, purpose, causality, connection, hope, and faith). This often takes the form of questioning prior beliefs and the meaning and purpose in life. In turn, this can be connected to a sense of loss of purpose, hopelessness, and cynicism.</li> <li>• <b>Changes in identity</b> (e.g., changes in the way you practice or think about important identities as a professional, friend, or family member). You could, for example, find that most of your time and energy is spent in your professional role because you feel disconnected from or uncomfortable in your other roles or identities.</li> <li>• <b>Changes in beliefs related to major psychological needs</b> (e.g., beliefs regarding safety, control, trust, esteem, and intimacy). For example, changes in how vulnerable you believe you, and others that you care about, are to harm. In turn, these beliefs can influence your thoughts (e.g., worrying about safety issues, mistrust of strangers) and actions (e.g., being more protective of your children).</li> </ul>
<p><b>PHYSICAL &amp; PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyperarousal symptoms (e.g., nightmares, difficulty concentrating, being easily startled, sleep difficulties)</li> <li>• Repeated thoughts or images regarding traumatic events, especially when you are trying not to think about it</li> <li>• Feeling numb</li> <li>• Feeling unable to tolerate strong emotions</li> <li>• Increased sensitivity to violence</li> <li>• Cynicism</li> <li>• Generalized despair and hopelessness, and loss of idealism</li> <li>• Guilt regarding your own survival and/or pleasure</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Disgust</li> <li>• Fear</li> </ul>

## BEHAVIOR & RELATIONSHIPS SIGNS

- Difficulty setting boundaries and separating work from personal life
- Feeling like you never have time or energy for yourself.
- Feeling disconnected from loved ones, even when communicating with them
- Increased conflict in relationships
- General social withdrawal
- Experiencing the “silencing response” - finding yourself unable to pay attention to others distressing stories because they seem overwhelming and incomprehensible; and directing people to talk about less distressing material
- Decreased interest in activities that used to bring pleasure, enjoyment, or relaxation
- Irritable, intolerant, agitated, impatient, needy, and/or moody
- Increased dependencies or addictions involving nicotine, alcohol, food, sex, shopping , internet, and/or other substances
- Sexual difficulties
- Impulsivity

## Think about...

- Write down any signs of vicarious trauma that you have experienced this week.
- Think back over the last couple of years. What are your early warning signs of vicarious trauma (i.e., the first signals that warn you that you’re struggling in this area)?
- Follow this link to a test that you might find interesting and useful, the ProQol (Professional Quality of Life scale, Stamm, 2005)

## How can your vicarious trauma affect others?

Earlier in this section we looked at signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma. These signs and symptoms might be **happening to you, but they don’t only affect you**. Unaddressed vicarious trauma also affects your family, your organization, and those you are working to help.



### Your family and friends

Your struggles can have a serious impact on your family and friends. Things that can be related to vicarious trauma (such as withdrawal, overusing alcohol, lack of sleep, diminished sexuality, parental overprotectiveness, loss of compassion and hope) all influence the way you interact with those you love. If you are experiencing vicarious trauma and don't think it's affecting your family and close friends... ask them.

*Vicarious trauma influences the way you act and interact with people you love. This affects your family and friends.*

### Think about...

Consider asking people you are close to (your spouse, family members, or close friends) the following:

- What have you noticed about the way I behave and appear to feel when I'm under pressure?
- In what ways do you think my work has impacted me during the last week/month/ year?
- From your point of view, how does this most impact you/other people whom you care about?

### Your work

Unrecognized and unaddressed vicarious trauma can also affect your work, your colleagues, the overall functioning of the organization, and the quality of assistance being provided to those you are working to help. Humanitarian workers impacted by vicarious trauma are more likely to do some or all of the following:

- Make decisions without adequate reflection;
- Make mistakes that cost time or money, and may even put people at risk;
- Take on too much work, or assignments that the team or agency is ill-prepared to complete (or complete well);
- Not fulfill commitments;
- Take excessive unplanned time off;
- Blame others instead of seeking understanding and productive collaboration;
- Devalue and/or ridicule beneficiaries, staff, managers, or donors; and
- Infect colleagues with their own cynicism, depression, and/or lack of motivation.

*Vicarious trauma can negatively affect your work, your colleagues, the overall functioning of the organization, and the quality of assistance being provided to those you are working to help.*

### Think about...

- If you have struggled with vicarious trauma in the past, or feel you may be struggling with it now, what are some ways your vicarious trauma may impact your work?
- What are some ways that colleagues' vicarious trauma has affected you?
- Think about your own "early warning signs for vicarious trauma" that you identified earlier. How might these impact your family, your colleagues, and your work?

## **PART FOUR | *What Helps: Addressing Vicarious Trauma***

What puts you at risk for vicarious trauma is unique – different people have different risk factors. The things that will help you address your vicarious trauma are also unique – they will reflect your own needs, experiences, interests, resources, culture, and values.

The rest of this module will look at how you can develop a plan that suits you for addressing your vicarious trauma. We'll start by looking at two related aspects of addressing vicarious trauma – **coping with it** and **transforming it**. Then we'll look at three important themes that can help you in designing your action plan – **awareness, balance, and connection**.

*An effective action plan for addressing vicarious trauma will reflect your own needs, experiences, interests, resources, culture, and values.*

### **Coping with vicarious trauma**

Most humanitarian workers witness or hear about a great deal of need and suffering during the course of their work, and most humanitarian workers will probably experience some vicarious trauma as a result.

**Coping** with vicarious trauma means learning to live with this process so that you can do your job. It means accepting some vicarious trauma as part of the work and learning to manage it effectively on a day-to-day basis. On a practical level it means identifying strategies that can both **help prevent** vicarious trauma from becoming severe and problematic, and **help manage vicarious trauma** during times when it is more problematic.

*Coping with vicarious trauma means identifying strategies that can both help prevent vicarious trauma from becoming severe, and help manage vicarious trauma during times when it is more problematic.*

Good coping strategies are things that help you take care of yourself – especially things that help you **escape, rest, and play**. Among other things, these might include:

- **Escape:** Getting away from it all, physically or mentally (books or films, taking a day or a week off, playing video games, talking to friends about things other than work);
- **Rest:** Having no goal or time-line, or doing things you find relaxing (lying on the grass watching the clouds, sipping a cup of tea, taking a nap, getting a massage); and
- **Play:** Engaging in activities that make you laugh or lighten your spirits (sharing funny stories with a friend, playing with a child, being creative, being physically active).

*Good coping strategies for vicarious trauma are things that help you take care of yourself – especially those that help you escape, rest, and play.*

### Think about...

- What are three activities you do regularly or enjoy doing that can help you cope with vicarious trauma?
- Why do these activities help you in coping with vicarious trauma (Hint, think about how these activities can help counteract your risk factors for vicarious trauma, or address your specific signs of vicarious trauma).

### Transforming vicarious trauma

Transforming vicarious trauma means something deeper than just coping with it. Remember that, over time, one of the key components of vicarious trauma is changes in your spirituality. You can come to question your deepest beliefs about the way life and the universe work, and the existence and nature of meaning and hope. Humanitarian workers may be confronted on a daily basis with some of the most troubling questions we as humans will ever encounter - why is there so much suffering in this world? Is there a God? If so, how could God allow such terrible things to happen? Why do people do such awful things to each other? Why them, and not me?

As your deepest beliefs are challenged and changed as a result of what you see and experience during your work, you change as a person. This isn't always a comfortable process! Yes, you will be changed by seeing and hearing about terrible things, and by experiencing vicarious trauma. But you aren't a helpless victim in that process. You can transform your vicarious trauma and help use these painful experiences for good.

At the deepest level, **transforming** vicarious trauma means identifying ways to nurture a sense of meaning and hope. What gives life and work meaning, and what instills or renews hope? Knowing how you answer these questions is important. This gives you a framework to grapple with the tough questions that humanitarian work raises – even when those questions don't seem to have easy (or sometimes, any) answers. Finding ways to stay connected to important sources of meaning and hope in your life, even when you are being deeply challenged, will help you transform your vicarious trauma.

*Transforming vicarious trauma means identifying ways to nurture a sense of meaning and hope.*

You likely have sources of meaning, purpose, hope, and perspective in your life. Some ways to connect (or reconnect) with these may be:

- Reminding yourself of the importance and value of humanitarian work;
- Staying connected with family, friends, and colleagues;
- Noticing and deliberately paying attention to the “little things” – small moments like sipping a cup of coffee, the sound of the wind in the trees, or brief connections with others;
- Marking transitions, celebrating joys, and mourning losses with people you care about through traditions, rituals, or ceremonies;
- Taking time to reflect (e.g., by reading, writing, prayer, and meditation);
- Identifying and challenging your own cynical beliefs; and
- Undertaking growth-promoting activities (learning, writing in a journal, being creative and artistic).

### Think about...

- What are three activities you do regularly or enjoy doing that could help you transform vicarious trauma on a deeper level?
- What do you think the difference is between a coping and a transforming activity? Could something help you cope and be transformational at the same time? How?

## **PART FIVE | The ABC's: Three important themes**

There are three especially important themes to keep in mind when considering a long-term action plan to help you address vicarious trauma - **awareness**, **balance**, and **connection**. Let's look at each in turn.

*Three important themes in an effective action plan for vicarious trauma are awareness, balance, and connection.*

### **Awareness**

Awareness can help you address vicarious trauma in at least two ways. First, it can help you identify and understand your own reactions. Second, the practice of awareness itself can also be good for helping you address vicarious trauma.

### **Understanding your responses**

Awareness is an essential first step in figuring out what you are experiencing (your responses to what's happening in your work, as well as the rest of life) and what you can do to care for yourself in this time.

You should check in with yourself regularly. How are you feeling (physically and emotionally)? Can you figure out at least some of the reasons why you might be feeling this way? The earlier you notice that something is getting to you – making you tense, uncomfortable, distressed, annoyed, or tired, for example – the easier it is to prevent bigger problems. A self-awareness check can help you figure out:

- Potential risk factors that you're being exposed to; and
- How you are responding

Sometimes your self-awareness check will tell you, "This is a really tough day, but tomorrow will be better," and it is. Sometimes your awareness check will tell you, "Something's really wrong, and I don't know what it is." That calls for taking time as soon as possible to reflect (e.g., through writing, talking to someone you trust, drawing, painting, or however you connect with yourself and your feelings). Sometimes a self-awareness check leads to the realization that something really is wrong and there isn't much you can do about it for now.

*Understanding your responses and what might be contributing to them can lead you to a sense of what you need, and how to change what's happening or manage your own responses so that things don't get worse.*

“As with so many other conditions, prevention is the most effective approach. There is no way to avoid stress and overload [ completely] in this work, but the trick is to know your own warning signs and recognize early the need to make adjustments to your work and personal care strategies”

— Kitsy Schoen, working in HIV/AIDS caregiving, ( Schoen, 1998, p.527 )

### Awareness as a discipline

Being aware of what you’re doing while you’re doing it, deliberately keeping your mind and your body in the same place, is a common spiritual discipline.

If you can stay more aware in this sense (feeling present and connected) while you are working, vicarious trauma may be less likely to develop. This type of awareness can help you take in the pain around you and observe as it moves through your mind and body, touching you without paralyzing you. This is a lot easier said than done, but it is possible that the simple act of being more aware of your actions and reactions can help your experiences of your own and others’ pain feel more manageable.

*Being aware of what you’re doing while you’re doing it, deliberately keeping your mind and your body in the same place, may help prevent and manage vicarious trauma.*

### Think about...

- Spend some time reflecting on how you’re feeling (physically, emotionally, and spiritually). How did you feel when you woke up this morning? How do you feel now? Are you aware of anything out of the ordinary? If so, what might that be related to?
- What is your opinion of the statement that “pain is inevitable but suffering is optional”? Do you see this as relevant to your experiences of vicarious trauma? If so, how?

### Balance

When you are thinking about ways to address and transform vicarious trauma, it’s important to consider the issue of balance. Here are a couple of areas in which balance is particularly important:

- Balancing your personal needs with the demands of your work; and
- Balancing really demanding work with less challenging work.



### Work-life balance

You should take a break (daily, weekly, monthly, and annually) to balance the rest of your life with your work. Among other things, this means:

- Making sure that each work day includes some breaks for meals and physical activity or rest (depending on what you're taking a break from); and
- Taking time away from work for rest and relaxation, for friends and family, for spiritual renewal, and for professional development. In particular, it's important to spend time with people whom you don't have to take care of or rescue. There are times when this is not possible. Some days, you are the desperate person, yet you have to take care of others. That can happen from time to time, but it becomes dangerous when it's chronic – when you are not able to find a balance between caring for others and being cared for.

### Balance on the job

Balance is not just about balancing work with other important aspects of your life; it is also about finding a balance within work that will allow you to work in a sustainable way. Humanitarian work is rarely a sprint. Much more often it is a marathon, and you should be thinking about working now in ways that help make sure you can still be doing this same work two years from now if you want to.

This means, for example, stopping work after a reasonable number of hours, even in disaster response situations. This can be very challenging when lots of people need help. But remember that research suggests that exhausted workers can actually do more harm than good, because of the mistakes they often make. It also means thinking ahead whenever you can to balance your more and less challenging tasks. Of course, such planning is not always possible. But to the extent that you can plan your work days and weeks according to the rhythm that works best for you, you will work more effectively and with less emotional exhaustion and, ultimately, vicarious trauma.

*Part of an effective approach to addressing vicarious trauma is to find the right balance for you as often as you can. This means balancing your work with the rest of your life, and also balancing demanding work with less challenging work.*

### Think about...

- Complete this sentence five times, in five different ways: “I sometimes find it difficult to balance \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_.” (Hint, think about demands, responsibilities, and desires across different people, roles, and situations in your life).
- What are two issues or themes around which you most frequently feel as if you struggle to find balance?

## Connection

The final theme we will look at is connection – connection with other people, and with our spiritual selves.

### Connecting with other people

Social support – connecting meaningfully with people you like and care about – is good for just about everything related to physical and mental health. The best social support involves more than just casual connections with the people around you; it requires connecting with personal and professional communities.

A **community** is something very special. A true community is a group of people who know each other, share experiences and values, and reach out to one another in good times or in times of need or distress. Families, clubs, professional bodies, and faith groups, for example, can all be communities. Different communities often provide different types of support, so belonging to more than one community can be valuable.

“Strong relationships afford the best protection in traumatic and stressful environments... Above all factors, we seem to be dependent on the strength and nature of our relationships with one another, with the earth on which we live, and with the God who created us.”

— (Fawcett, 2003, p.7)

*Maintaining nurturing relationships and meaningful contact with family, friends, and colleagues is one of the best things we can recommend to help address vicarious trauma.*

### Spiritual connection

Being connected goes beyond our relationships with other people. It is also important to feel connected to whatever it is that nurtures or anchors you – be that God, faith, nature, humanity, or another source or meaning and purpose. This is especially important for humanitarian workers because this core sense of spiritual connection can help prevent and fight the loss of meaning and hope that are at the heart of vicarious trauma. The key to transforming vicarious trauma is to find one’s own path to spiritual renewal – to connect with a sense of awe, joy, wonder, purpose, and hope – and revisit it regularly and frequently.

*An essential part of a spiritual connection is to find one’s own path to connecting with a sense of awe, joy, wonder, purpose, meaning, and hope, and revisit it regularly and frequently.*

#### Think about...

- What are two communities that are important to you? How do they “feed you” and help you feel supported and connected?
- What makes you feel connected spiritually? (Hint, remember that your spirituality is connected to your deepest sense of meaning and purpose. It can be related to a faith in God, nature, humanity, or something else).

## **PART SIX | *Working protectively***

Most of what has been written about vicarious trauma has focused on how you can help prevent and manage vicarious trauma by taking care of yourself outside work (e.g., spending time with family and doing other things you enjoy). However, the way you think about your work and do your job has a big impact on your experiences with vicarious trauma. This section looks at how you can help prevent and manage vicarious trauma on the job.

### **How you think about your work**

How you think about your work plays a big role in helping keep you healthy and balanced. Here are some important questions to answer.

1. **Why do you do this work?** Why did you choose to become a humanitarian worker when you started out? Why do you do it now? Knowing the answers to these questions can help connect you with a sense of meaning and purpose, and remind you that you can choose a different path if you want to. It may also highlight important differences between then and now that could help you rediscover your original motivation or begin a search for new inspiration.
2. **Do you know what you're doing in your work, and why?** Knowing how to do your job well and why you believe it's making a difference can help you understand how your work fits into the bigger picture of humanitarian work and the mission of your organization. This provides a framework that can help you remember that your actions have purpose, and that they may be contributing to positive change even when you can't see change taking place. If you have trouble with this question, you may want to ask for information from your agency about its overall mission, its mission in the setting where you are currently working, and any signs they see of change or progress.
3. **How do you measure success in your work?** Do you have a long list of specific goals you must accomplish to feel like you've succeeded, or do you feel like you've succeeded if you give your best every day regardless of whether everything on your to-do list gets done? Focusing on giving your best (even if on some days, it's just the best you can do that day) rather than only on outcomes can help give you a healthier perspective, remind you of what you can and can't control, and open up various ways for you to feel successful in your work.

4. **What can you control in your work?** Where can you make choices about your work content, structure, and schedule? What can you control about your work and its outcomes, and what can't you? You can burn up energy and motivation by focusing too much on things you can't change. Knowing what you can control can also prevent you from blaming yourself for things that are outside your control or (on the other hand) feeling like a victim. Even in circumstances in which you have very little control over your work life, you can often choose your attitude, whether to smile at others, what to wear each day. These small choices can help make the lack of larger choices more bearable.
5. **What are the costs and rewards of this work, and how are you personally changing?** Humanitarian work can be demanding, and being changed by the work at some level is inevitable. Understanding this can help you stay alert to ways (both positive and negative) in which you are changing. Knowing what you find rewarding about your work can also help you focus on the positive. It can be easy to focus on all the problems and risks associated with humanitarian work. But even in the most demanding situations you can often see examples of determination, ingenuity, compassion, faith, resilience, and even heroism. Look for and support these attitudes and behaviors, both in yourself and in others.

*How you think about work plays a big role in keeping you balanced and healthy and helping prevent and manage vicarious trauma.*

### Think about...

- Take some time to make some notes or discuss the answers to each of the sets of questions in items 1 through 5 above.
- Which of these sets of questions do you feel like you struggle the most with (maybe you don't know the answers to those questions, or the way you normally think about work in that area is unhelpful). Why?
- Which of these question areas do you feel you are strongest in? Why? How does your thinking in that area help protect you from vicarious trauma?

## How you do your work

Healthy thinking is good on its own, but even better if it's linked to healthy practices at work. Here are some suggestions about how you can work in ways that help prevent and manage vicarious trauma.

- **Change some of the things that bother you:** Change some of the things that you can control that bother you (e.g., if your workplace is grim and dirty, clean it up so that it doesn't depress you).
- **Intentionally make choices when you can:** Make choices about things you can control (e.g., when to break for lunch).
- **Connect with (or disconnect from) people:** If you work mostly alone, find ways to connect with people during the day (e.g., take five minutes to ask how someone's weekend was). If you work mostly with people, take small breaks, including time out from conversation during which you let your mind go to positive, secure, or comforting thoughts. This will help you remember to see people as individuals rather than tasks.
- **Try something different at work:** Look for opportunities to do something different from your usual work (e.g., write an article, offer to teach a workshop, collaborate with a colleague on a project, ask someone new for assistance). If you are in a job that's very routine, try changing the order in which you do your usual tasks.
- **Write about your experiences at work:** Even making brief notes about your experiences at work can be helpful. It can be a good way to record something important and move it out of the center of your attention. Over time it can also help you learn about your job and yourself.
- **Find ways to retain or regain perspective during the day:** Find little ways to connect briefly with things or thoughts that nurture or refresh your spirit and help you see work in the context of the bigger picture. Some things people often find helpful are looking at pictures of loved ones, praying or meditating, imagining themselves in a refreshing place, and breathing exercises. These activities can help you calm your body as well as ground your mind.
- **Invest in professional networks and relationships with colleagues:** Knowing people who do similar work and sharing resources, strategies, and stories help bridge the sense of isolation that is often a part of vicarious trauma. Sharing some non-work experiences with colleagues can also help you feel more like a whole person at work.
- **Find more than one healthy habit:** One good strategy will not be enough to protect you effectively from vicarious trauma. Make sure you are practicing several different healthy working habits.

*Healthy thinking is good on its own, but even better if it's linked to healthy practice at work. Make sure you are practicing several different healthy working habits.*

### Think about...

- Which of the practices above do you already do well? How?
- Which of the practices above do you not do so well? Why are these hard for you?
- What other healthy working habits can you think of that may help you lessen and manage vicarious trauma in your job?



## **PART SEVEN | *What can organizations and managers do?***

Some humanitarian workers feel that their own organization increases their vicarious trauma instead of helping reduce it! Your organization's policies and practices may be frustrating and make things feel unnecessarily complicated. But it's worth remembering that organizations and managers don't deliberately set out to make life more difficult for you and the people you are trying to help. Rather, they are usually facing many competing demands and don't have enough time or resources to do everything with the greatest care and consideration.

However, when humanitarian organizations take an active interest in staff well-being they take a big step towards addressing things that can contribute to vicarious trauma. Even in crisis situations there are many ways organizations and management can structure work roles and develop organizational cultures that help lessen vicarious trauma in humanitarian workers.

*Even in crisis situations there is a lot that organizations and management can do to structure work roles and develop organizational cultures that help lessen vicarious trauma in their staff.*

### **Basic considerations for organizations**

Here are some basic considerations for organizations. These lessen the risk of vicarious trauma by helping humanitarian workers feel supported, valued, competent, and connected:

- Adequate salary and time off (including R & R) for all staff;
- Sufficient orientation, professional training, and management supervision for staff to feel competent and supported in their jobs;
- Plans for staff safety (including security training and briefing on security protocols);
- Access to medical and mental health support services including:
- Health insurance;
- Information/training about the psychological and spiritual hazards of the work and effective self-care;
- Access to good confidential counseling support as needed; and
- Support for families around issues such as child care, separation, and relocation.

*Some basic considerations for organizations include: salary and leave policies; professional development programs; management practices; plans for staff safety; access to medical and mental health support services; and family support services.*

## Organizational culture and work roles

In addition, humanitarian workers will benefit from an organizational culture and work roles that are structured in ways that help prevent vicarious trauma by:

- Encouraging connections, morale, and relationships, perhaps through some or all of the following:
  - Working in teams;
  - Other avenues to connect with colleagues (e.g., social activities such as having lunch or occasional outings together);
  - Peer support networks.
- Encouraging communication and staff contributions by:
  - Providing a voice in decision-making from and feedback to staff at all levels of the organizational hierarchy;
  - Providing information to help staff understand how and why decisions about resource allocations, deadlines, policies, and assignments are made.
- Looking for ways to build diversity and job enrichment into the work;
- Allowing for and actively encouraging staff to take adequate breaks during work.

*In particular, humanitarian workers will benefit from an organizational culture and work role that helps them establish & maintain relationships, encourages communication, provides for diversity & development, and allows enough time off.*

### Think about...

- What are some things your organization already does well to support its staff and help reduce the risk of vicarious trauma?
- Are there some practical things you can think of that your organization could do better to support staff and reduce the risk of vicarious trauma:
  - During recruitment?
  - During orientation?
  - During employment?
  - Upon leaving the organization?

## What managers can do

Are you a manager? Managers can take many steps to help lessen the impact of vicarious trauma on staff they are supervising. Here are some of them.

1. Understand the psychological and spiritual impact of humanitarian work:
  - Be alert to how the cumulative exposure to stressful and traumatic situations may be affecting staff.
  - Regularly check in with staff about how they're coping – do not wait for them to approach you with a problem.
  - Support staff in seeking counseling or coaching if and when needed.
2. Set a good example in the way that you care for yourself, including:
  - Work at a sustainable and reasonable pace over time, and encourage staff you supervise to do the same;
  - Openly value things and people outside of work (e.g., time spent with your family);
  - Take allocated leave time;
  - Acknowledge that humanitarian work can be challenging and that healthy work/life balance takes practice and intentionality.
3. Especially during times of increased pressure or crises, look for ways to help staff keep current challenges in perspective by:
  - Reminding staff of the bigger picture of the organization's mission and purpose, and how this assignment or disaster response fits into that bigger picture; and
  - Reminding staff of the value the organization places upon them both as people and the organization's most important resources. Encourage staff to work in sustainable ways. If that does not appear possible in the short-term, encourage them to take extra time after the immediate impact phase is over to rest and regain equilibrium.
4. Express concern for the general well-being of your staff and not just the quality of the work they are doing.
5. Make sure that staff suggestions and feedback about their jobs and the organization are heard and valued – even if you are fairly sure they will not result in tangible change in the near future.
6. Do not say or do things that would stigmatize staff who are struggling with vicarious trauma or other stress or trauma-related issues.
7. Strive to stay positive, and to praise and acknowledge effort and results whenever possible.

*Managers can do many things to help lessen the impact of vicarious trauma on staff they are supervising, including being a good example in how they maintain balance and care for themselves.*

### Think about...

- If you are a manager, what are some things you do well to help lessen the impact of vicarious trauma on your staff? If you aren't a manager, what does your manager do well?
- What are some things you as a manager (or your manager) could do better to help lessen the impact of vicarious trauma?

## **PART EIGHT | *Make a vicarious action plan***

You probably wouldn't set out to help the people you serve without a plan. Why not give yourself the benefit of that same approach? This exercise can be completed in 15 minutes, or you can spend more time on it. We strongly recommend that you repeat it at least every couple of months.

As you complete the exercise, you might like to refer back to the text of this module. For each question we've included links back to the relevant section. You can also look at the other document that was provided with this Reading Course which is a list of all the **"Think about..."** questions in this module for you to fill out. If you have been taking notes in response to these questions, those notes will help you complete this exercise.

1. List your important risk factors for vicarious trauma. These are things that get in the way of you helping others. They come from three main areas:
  - From personal factors (e.g., past and current stress in your life)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - From your situation (e.g., work-related factors)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - From the cultural context (e.g., discrimination and attitudes of intolerance)

2. List any signs or symptoms of vicarious trauma that you are experiencing. Think about the following areas:
  - Physical
  - Psychological
  - Behavior and relationships
  - Worldview or frame of reference (spirituality, identity, and beliefs)
  
3. What are things that you can do to cope better with these symptoms? (Hint: Think about how you can counteract your risk factors, and remember that good coping strategies for vicarious trauma are things that help you take care of yourself – especially things that help you escape, rest, and play.) How can you take care of yourself in the following areas:
  - Physical
  - Mental and emotional
  - Behavior and relationships
  - At work

4. What steps can you take that can help you transform your vicarious trauma on a deeper level? (Hint: remember that transforming vicarious trauma means identifying ways to nurture a sense of meaning and hope).
- Outside work
  
  - During work
5. Pick two things you have listed in response to questions 3 or 4, and think about how you will put those into practice this week. Set two specific, realistic, goals by completing the sentence below (Hint: think about how, when, and where you achieve these goals and put that in your answer too):
6. *This week I will \_\_\_\_\_ to help prevent or manage vicarious trauma.*
7. What obstacles might get in the way of you doing the two things you identified in item 5, above?
8. What might you do to overcome the obstacles listed above? What will support you in accomplishing your goals (Hint: think about people who can support you and how they might encourage you).

## STUDY TEXT RESOURCES

This module provides an introduction to the topic of vicarious trauma and humanitarian work. It is intended to provide you with some basic information about vicarious trauma, and to guide you towards additional resources. Other helpful websites and books are listed below.

If you would like more information, or if you wish to speak to a mental health professional or desire a professional referral, please contact the Headington Institute at [support@headington-institute.org](mailto:support@headington-institute.org) or phone (626) 229-9336.

### On the internet

[Professional Quality of Life Scale \(ProQOL V\) \(I updated this one from version IV to version 5\)](#)

[What is Vicarious Trauma? \(video\)](#)

[Transforming Vicarious Trauma \(video\)](#)

[Vicarious Trauma: What Can Managers Do?](#)

### Books

*Transforming the pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization* (1996). By Karen Saakvitne and Laurie Anne Pearlman. Published by W.W. Norton and Company.

Written for any professional, paraprofessional, or volunteer working in a helping role with traumatized individuals, there is much in here that is useful for humanitarian workers seeking a deeper understanding of vicarious trauma.

*Stress and Trauma Handbook: Strategies for Flourishing in Demanding Environments* (2003). Edited by John Fawcett. Published by World Vision International.

*The Humanitarian Companion* (2004). Written by John Ehrenreich. Published by IDTG Publishing.

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