






EMPLOYEE SERIES

Tips for dealing with Vicarious Trauma

“Vicarious trauma is a cumulative effect of working with trauma, which can affect many aspects of a person's life. It may consist of short-term reactions, or longer-term effects that continue long after the work has finished” (Australian Institute of Family Studies - Mouldern & Firestone, 2007, p. 68).

Exposing yourself to another person's traumatic experiences can bring about changes, including to your psychological, physical and spiritual wellbeing. Our brains use “mirror neurons” when we are compassionate and have empathy for others. The emotions we mirror impact us mentally, emotionally and physically, even though we have not been through them ourselves. Over time or in extreme cases hearing, seeing or reading traumatic stories can cause “vicarious trauma” because we have not lived through the trauma directly ourselves but we have a trauma response.

What to look out for:

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Emotionally – Feeling unsafe in the world and interpersonally, difficulty regulating emotions e.g. – mood swings, irritability, easily startled, hypervigilance, emotional exhaustion, feeling hopeless/helpless/depressed, increased sensitivity to violence and other forms of abuse when either in discussion or watching it on TV.
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Behavioral – trouble sleeping or getting to sleep, increased heart rate or perspiration, isolation, withdrawal, difficulty relating to or being over critical of others, over or under eating, substance abuse.
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Cognitively – ruminating thoughts about the trauma, difficulty concentrating, nightmares, not wanting to go to work or feeling heavy at work.

How to manage this:

- 'Self-care' refers to proactive strategies or routines that professionals use to offset the negative aspects of working with trauma victims and to promote their own wellbeing e.g. exercise, massage, meditation, creative outlets.
- Having and maintaining interests completely separate from work, taking breaks from work and at work when needed.
- Taking up opportunities for debriefing, supervision and other therapeutic support.
- Maintaining connections with others outside the field.
- Accepting and giving positive feedback.
- Spiritual engagement.
- Humour.
- Identifying and reminding themselves of successes within their work.

If you or someone you know are concerned about vicarious trauma, please seek professional advice for further wellbeing and mental health support.

If you would like to book an appointment and /or speak with one of our Counsellors, it's as easy as calling 1300 66 77 00 or New Zealand 0800 327 669 or visit our website www.accesswellbeingservices.com.au