



VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Trauma associated with human trafficking can be devastating and lasting, as many victims suffer psychological and physical abuse at the hands of traffickers. Related trauma can also significantly affect the physical and emotional well-being of the professionals who assist and care for trafficking victims. This vicarious trauma, also referred to as compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress, refers to the negative reactions that can occur when professionals repeatedly witness or hear about victims' difficult experiences of trauma, violence, and abuse. The signs of vicarious trauma resemble post-traumatic stress disorder, and can include emotional, behavioral, and physical symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, disturbed sleep, change in appetite, irritability, nightmares, loss of empathy, and numbness.

Direct service providers, social workers, shelter staff, law enforcement officials, prosecutors, interpreters, and others involved in various aspects of providing care to a victim of human trafficking or handling a trafficking case, are especially vulnerable to experiencing vicarious trauma.

To minimize the risk of vicarious trauma, it is important for anti-trafficking professionals to take steps to develop self-awareness and establish healthy coping mechanisms. Common questions to check for symptoms of vicarious trauma include:

- » How are you physically and emotionally affected by your work?
- » How well are you able to separate work from the rest of your life?
- » How do you feel when hearing about a specific trafficking case?
- » Do you have signs of vicarious trauma or other forms of stress?
- » What kind of self-care are you practicing? Is it helping?

Healthy coping mechanisms for professionals in the anti-trafficking field should include organization-wide policies and individual self-care strategies. A few strategies include:

- » Develop self-care and stress management strategies, e.g., exercise, build a strong social or community network, practice relaxation techniques, make time for extracurricular activities, etc.
- » Establish formal support structures and safe spaces at work.
- » Seek out support among peers in other organizations.
- » Talk with a mental health professional (individual and group counseling).
- » Establish professional boundaries.
- » Participate in capacity-building and training.



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