

## Wellbeing for the Bush

# VICARIOUS TRAUMA

### Managing the cumulative impact of other people's trauma

Healthcare workers choose their careers because they care deeply for others. This caring connection involves empathy and a sense of responsibility for others. When working with trauma survivors, this caring connection is an essential part of the healing process. However, it can leave you more vulnerable to vicarious trauma.

**Vicarious trauma is like the frog in boiling water—it builds up so slowly that you don't notice how much it's affecting you until it's already taken a serious toll.**



*"Vicarious trauma is a form of cumulative trauma, and refers to the psychological, emotional and physical distress that can result from repeated exposure to traumatic content. It is characterised by negative changes in the professional's perceptions of themselves and the world."<sup>1</sup>*

### Signs and symptoms

There are physical, behavioural and emotional/psychological signs of vicarious trauma, some of which include:

#### Physical

- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Sleep disturbance
- Physical aches and pains
- Changes in appetite
- Weakened immune system
- Gastrointestinal issues

#### Behavioural

- Withdrawal and isolation
- Avoidance
- Changes in work performance
- Increased substance use
- Changes in relationships
- Hypervigilance
- Difficulty concentrating

#### Emotional/psychological

- Anxiety and/or depression
- Emotional numbness
- Detachment
- Irritability and anger
- Guilt and shame
- Loss of hope and meaning
- Intrusive thoughts
- Flashbacks

## What to do

### For individuals

Healthcare workers are often more reluctant to seek help due to perceived stigma within the professions. However, it's essential to prioritise your wellbeing and seek help as soon as possible. If you feel vicarious trauma is something you may be experiencing, or any of the symptoms listed sound familiar:

- Check out our CRANaplus resources designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of rural and remote health workers.



- Access regular clinical or peer supervision, or increase the frequency of supervision if exposure to vicarious trauma is high. Talking through experiences helps the brain process information and try to make sense of what occurred.
- Develop a self-care plan (you can use the CRANaplus Self-care Plan available on our resources webpage).
- Talk to your line manager, co-workers, family and friends and ask for support. Be specific about what you need, as everyone's needs are different.
- Access cultural or spiritual activities.
- Call the Bush Support Line 24/7 on 1800 805 391.
- Talk to your GP and consider accessing professional support.

1. Hydon S, Wong M, Langley AK, Stein BD, Kataoka SH. Preventing secondary traumatic stress in educators. Child Adolesc Psychiatr Clin N Am. 2015;24(2):319-33. In [https://research.iscr.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/3411064/342\\_ER\\_Vicarious-trauma-prevention-FINAL-15.06.2023.pdf](https://research.iscr.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/3411064/342_ER_Vicarious-trauma-prevention-FINAL-15.06.2023.pdf)



### For managers and team leaders

- Attend to all the strategies at an individual level first. Modelling is a great practice that speaks volumes.
- Talk about vicarious trauma in the workplace and inform all team members of the signs. Remember, it is not 'if' but 'when' staff will experience it, and everyone experiences it differently. Normalise the effects of working with trauma survivors.
- Have a thorough staff induction for all new staff and provide them with a 'buddy' where available.
- Provide good staff support and encourage or facilitate clinical or peer supervision for your staff and yourself.
- Promote and support staff to prioritise their wellbeing and implement self-care strategies.
- Ensure workloads are distributed evenly, including trauma cases.