

Vicarious Traumatism

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre Resource



The following resource is primarily aimed at people who work with the public & who may need to work with or assist those traumatised by rape or sexual abuse. However, it may also be useful if you are supporting a friend or loved one in the aftermath of sexual violence. It is intended to help you recognise and understand the possible knock-on impact that providing such support may have on you personally, and how to deal with that.

Encountering the stories of victims of rape or child sexual abuse is stressful and traumatic. In the course of your work, you may hear or read details of horrific abuse, and of the pain, sometimes lifelong, experienced as a consequence.

As you witness the stories and the impact of trauma, you may experience a traumatic response yourself. It is worth reflecting on how working with trauma may be traumatising for you.

Research indicates that those who listen to stories of trauma are highly vulnerable to **Secondary Traumatic Stress** or **Vicarious Traumatism**. Reactions are similar to those of clients, but to a lesser degree. Vicarious Traumatism impacts on the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, spiritual, interpersonal and physical level. These of course overlap with each other.

Impacts of trauma

Cognitive: loss of concentration; confusion; lowered self-esteem; trauma focus; self-doubt; disillusionment; intrusive thoughts; intrusive disturbing imagery

Psychological/Emotional: powerlessness; anxiety; guilt; anger; numbness; depression; feeling emotionally depleted or overwhelmed; hypersensitivity; flashbacks; nightmares; panic attacks

Behavioural: needy; impatient; irritable; withdrawn; moody; disturbed sleep, disturbed eating; negative coping behaviours (drinking, smoking, substance misuse)

Spiritual: questioning meaning of life; loss of purpose; lack of self satisfaction; hopelessness; loss of faith; focussing on the negatives in humanity

Interpersonal: withdrawn; loss of interest in intimacy or sex; mistrust; isolation from friends; intolerance; irritability; loneliness; impacts on parenting and other relationships; impact on feelings re gender and sexuality

Physical: shock; sweating; rapid heartbeat; breathing problems; impaired immune system; aches and pains; weight changes.

Prevention

- Clearly define your role and responsibilities and its boundaries. You are not responsible for the client's experiences or distress or for solving the client's problems or meeting all of his/her needs or concerns. You are responsible for fulfilling your limited role in a caring and professional manner.
- Prepare for the day's work. Arrive a little early, and give yourself some moments beforehand. Try not to be rushing to an appointment, or focussed on other demands. Take a few minutes to clear your head.
- Take on the protection of your professional role, reminding yourself that this work is important to you and that you will do it with seriousness and concern, but that your own private life is separate from this.
- During a session, notice what happens for you, in your thoughts, images, emotions, and physically – sensations, movement, impulses. If you feel sick, light-headed, very emotional: ground yourself by noticing yourself sitting in the chair, the floor under your feet; take some deep breaths, and try to loosen your body - you could be sitting in a tense pose for a couple of hours if you are not aware.
- Take regular breaks and try to do something quite different during them, even for a few moments.
- Allow time for debriefing between one contact and the next.
- After a session, take a few moments to register how you are feeling and to let go of, shake out the session. Stretch and loosen your body, which may be holding some tension and trauma. Particularly those working on the telephone need to stretch and release tension in the shoulders and neck consistently through their shift.
- At the end of a day, take a little time to finish your day's work, being conscious of putting away files or materials, of locking up as a way of leaving the day behind. As you reach the outer door, consciously offload.
- The journey home can be used for unwinding and to make a transition between work and personal time.
- When you reach home, it is useful to have a routine to mark the transition from your working life to your home life, routines that differentiate them: showering, changing clothes, consciously leaving work behind, and taking on your personal life. The more conscious you are of offloading through your evening routine the more effective it will be.
- Limit your exposure where possible by seeing clients/reading documents for a limited time daily. Limit your exposure to traumatic material outside of work, eg TV, newspapers, social media. Consciously seek out the opposite to trauma: well being, recovery, goodness, joy.

- Communicate with the rest of the team about how you are feeling about the work, and draw on them for support.
- Provide yourself with as many opportunities as possible to enjoy activities which are fun, and make a conscious decision to link in often with the 'decent people' in your own life. Help yourself to maintain balance by taking part in activities that give you joy and pleasure.
- Be careful about rest and nutrition and monitor your alcohol and cigarette intake, which can increase beyond what you would wish when under pressure. Make sure you eat well: take your lunch break. Stress can cause us not to care what we eat, or to eat more junk food than is good for us. Listening with attention can be physically demanding: consider how you can relax physically and care for your back by stretching and easing out regularly.
- Exercise is a great release and will also allow an outlet for the energy which can build up when we are dealing with issues that cause us to feel anger or powerlessness. It also allows us to feel the competence, energy and power in our bodies after a period of absorbing a sense of powerlessness. It allows the fight or flight impulse that we may have experienced and truncated during a session to move through. It is very important to exercise when working with trauma.
- If you find you are bringing the thoughts of work home with you and that they are intruding on your personal life, address this in a supervision setting.
- It is important to maintain your social networks: stress and exhaustion can lead us to limit our social contact: positive contact will be especially necessary while you are doing this work. You will need to remind yourself about the positive aspects of the world by taking part in activities that give you joy and pleasure.
- Stress can cause us to spark off with family members or friends. Monitor on an ongoing basis whether the work is impacting on your relationships. If it is, this is a sign of a need for increased supervision and self-care. Bottling it up is a recipe for later explosion. You need ongoing supports and outlets.
- Do not be surprised or self-critical if this work impacts on your relationship with your own children, for example, you may find yourself feeling very over-protective. Seek support if necessary so that the effect does not become adverse.
- Be careful when travelling: take a moment at the start of the journey to become conscious of the road and the traffic. A person involved in intense work can be distracted on the journey to work or to home, and may speed, go through traffic lights etc.
- Don't be surprised if this work affects your own feelings about sexuality, or your own sexual life. Sometimes people experience flashbacks to images while engaged in sexual activity. Again, if this becomes a concern, seek support.

- Be careful not to offload onto your partner, sister, friends: they didn't choose to do this work. Or perhaps they also work in this field, and both of you need to be careful not to add to the other's trauma by sharing too much.
- Doing this work will impact on you personally. There may be times when you need space to consider and process this impact. Be open to the idea of counselling as a resource to you.

Disturbing images

Images are very powerful stimuli, some creating intense emotional and physical responses. We may put them out of our minds, but they can re-emerge in dreams, often in upsetting ways.

Powerful images once viewed or imagined become part of our life experience.

- Learn not to allow yourself to imagine people you care for, especially children, in the situations being described. Watch out for this later in the day: you may suddenly realise that on the way home you have spent ten minutes imagining this being done to a child you love; this is too traumatic and it is possible to learn not to do this.
- Don't take responsibility for what happens in your dreams. Our worst nightmares are, quite literally, played out in our dreams. But do seek support so as to off load the emotional impact if necessary.
- Use imagery to help you deal with intrusive images: watch as the image gets smaller and smaller, goes out of focus, or is placed in a container.
- Speaking about these images does rob them of some of their power. Professional support, external to your team may be necessary: a time and place where you can describe and express all that you are experiencing and feeling and offload.
- New information about the functioning of the human brain is emerging at an extraordinary pace. For example, research suggests that playing Tetris shortly after viewing violent images may greatly reduce their impact in relation to flashbacks and retention of the images. Keep up to date, what you discover will help you.

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is there for anyone affected by sexual violence, including those supporting others. You can call the [National 24-hour Helpline](tel:1800778888) 1800 77 8888 for confidential, non-judgemental information & support.

DRCC also offers [specialised training](#) on secondary trauma – contact our Education Department for more at etadmin@rcc.ie or 01-661 4911 or check out www.drcc.ie.

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, McGonnell House, 70 Lower Leeson St, Dublin 2
T: 01-6614911 | W: www.drcc.ie | E: counselling@rcc.ie