

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. 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, understand and manage the possible knock-on impact that providing such support may have on you personally.

What is Vicarious Trauma or Secondary Trauma?

Encountering the stories of victims of rape or child sexual abuse (CSA) can be 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. It is worth reflecting on how working with trauma may be impactful for you, on a personal level.

Research indicates that those who encounter stories of trauma frequently are highly vulnerable to **Secondary Traumatic Stress** or **Vicarious Traumatisation**. Reactions to vicarious traumatisation can be similar to those of those who experienced the trauma first-hand, but to a lesser degree. Vicarious Traumatisation can impact the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, spiritual, interpersonal and physical self. These can also overlap with each other



Some possible impacts of Vicarious Traumatisation include:

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Behavioural: needy; impatient; irritable; withdrawn; moody; disturbed sleep, disturbed eating; negative coping behaviours (drinking, smoking, substance misuse)

Further impacts may include:

Spiritual: questioning the meaning of life; loss of purpose; lack of self-satisfaction; hopelessness; loss of faith; focusing 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Interpersonal: withdrawn; loss of interest in intimacy or sex; mistrust; isolation from friends; intolerance; irritability; loneliness; impacts on parenting and other relationships;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

Disturbing Imagery as a Presentation of Vicarious Trauma

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.

To help combat the manifestation of disturbing imagery, you can try the following:

- **Practising not letting yourself 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; these thoughts can be very distressing, and with time, we can train ourselves not to do this.
- **Not taking responsibility for what happens in your dreams.** Our worst nightmares are, quite literally, played out in our dreams. But do seek support to offload the emotional impact if necessary.
- **Using 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, which can 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 the manifestation of flashbacks and retention of the images. Keep up to date on preventing and working through vicarious trauma as part of your self-care routine.

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is there for anyone affected by sexual violence, including those supporting others.

Remember: Supporters and professionals can call the 24-hour National Freephone Helpline at 1800 77 8888 at any time to receive free, confidential support.