

# **Understanding Vicarious Trauma and Professional Self-Care in Working with Trafficking Victims including Children and Adolescents**

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## **Learning for Practitioners in Costa Rica**



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# 1. Framing the Issue: Understanding Vicarious Trauma in Professionals

Working with individuals who have endured deep traumatic experiences, such as victims of human trafficking, requires professionals to engage empathetically with intense suffering. This sustained emotional involvement can lead to often overlooked psychological and emotional consequences among professionals. Understanding vicarious trauma is a critical first step in professionals' ability to self care and protect their health and well-being. By extension, this allows practitioners to build healthier and more sustainable support environments for the trafficking victims that they work with.

## 1.1 What is Vicarious Trauma?

Vicarious trauma – also known as secondary trauma – refers to the emotional and psychological impacts experienced by individuals who are exposed to the traumatic stories of others, often over long periods of time. Vicarious trauma does not arise from one's own lived experiences, but rather from repeated, empathetic engagement with the suffering of others who have experienced trauma. Over time, this exposure can lead to internalized distress that affects one's sense of identity, worldview, and feelings of personal safety, particularly when they feel powerless to effect change.<sup>1</sup>

Professionals working with child and adolescent trafficking victims are exposed to stories, experiences, and narratives that often include violence, brutality, coercion, dehumanization and cruelty. Professionals may find themselves absorbing emotional pain as they witness the long-term impacts of exploitation. For these professionals, the risk of developing vicarious trauma is especially elevated.

Vicarious trauma differs from direct trauma, which is an emotional, psychological, and physiological response to an experience that overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Direct trauma can arise from personal experiences of violence, abuse, or life-threatening situations. While vicarious trauma does not involve a direct experience of a traumatic event, the emotional outcomes of vicarious trauma and direct trauma are similar.

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[1] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies and IACP (n.d.) Vicarious Trauma Response Initiative. Alexandria: International Association of Chiefs of Police.

Vicarious trauma also differs from burnout, which is emotional exhaustion and detachment that stems primarily from chronic workplace stress, rather than trauma exposure. Burnout can affect professionals in any field, not only those working with individuals who have experienced trauma. Burnout often results from high workloads, lack of support, role conflict, or a mismatch between values and work culture. While burnout can coexist with vicarious trauma, the two are not synonymous. While burnout might be addressed through rest or changes in workload, vicarious trauma often requires deeper emotional processing, supervision, and support frameworks to mitigate its long-term effects.

Some professionals who experience vicarious trauma may develop symptoms, such as flashbacks or hypervigilance. Without effective processing or support, long-term exposure to others' trauma can severely reduce professionals' capacity to maintain compassion and professional clarity.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 How Does Vicarious Trauma Affect Professionals?

Many service providers working with trafficking victims describe feeling overwhelmed by a persistent sense of helplessness, particularly when repeatedly hearing stories of suffering they couldn't resolve or prevent.<sup>3</sup> This then undermines their overall well-being as well as their ability to engage sensitively and empathetically with the trafficking victims who they work with.

Vicarious trauma manifests in multiple dimensions – emotional, physical, cognitive, interpersonal and behavioral.

- **Emotionally**, vicarious trauma often manifests as persistent sadness, guilt, or emotional exhaustion. Professionals may experience a sense of hopelessness or despair when faced with the limits of their ability to alleviate suffering. Over time, this emotional overload may lead to empathy fatigue- a reduced ability to connect with clients in meaningful ways. Others may develop emotional numbness as a defense mechanism – appearing detached or “shut down” – in an unconscious effort to avoid being overwhelmed.<sup>4</sup>

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[2] Hughes, M. (2022) 'A vulnerability for people who combat human trafficking', Psychology Today.

[3] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

[4] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies and Hughes, M. (2022) 'A vulnerability for people who combat human trafficking', Psychology Today.

- **Physically**, trauma absorption affects the body in ways that mirror chronic stress responses. Common symptoms include fatigue that doesn't improve with rest, frequent headaches, muscle tension, gastrointestinal issues, and disruptions in appetite or sleep cycles. Some professionals may experience insomnia due to intrusive thoughts or emotional rumination. Prolonged physical symptoms not only reduce energy but may increase the risk of developing chronic health conditions, particularly when self-care is deprioritized.
- **Cognitively**, professionals affected by vicarious trauma often report difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, impaired decision-making, or racing thoughts. Some may experience intrusive imagery or emotional flashbacks triggered by clients' stories. Additionally, cognitive changes can alter one's worldview, causing increased cynicism, distrust in others, or a sense of disillusionment about justice systems and institutions. This shift can lead to disengagement from previously held values or a diminished sense of purpose in one's role.<sup>5</sup>
- **Interpersonally**, vicarious trauma can erode trust, empathy, and communication with others. Professionals may become distant from loved ones, emotionally unavailable in personal relationships, or overly reactive in situations that mirror trauma themes. Other impacts include strain in marriages, friendships, and parenting due to emotional depletion and the inability to "switch off" after work. Over time, this disconnection can deepen feelings of isolation and impact one's overall sense of support and belonging.<sup>6</sup>

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[5] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies and Surtees, R. and L.S. Johnson (2021) Recovery and reintegration of trafficking victims: A practitioner guide. Washington, D.C.: NEXUS Institute and Regional Support Office of the Bali Process (RSO).

[6] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

- **Behaviorally**, the effects of vicarious trauma often spill over into personal and social relationships. Emotional detachment or irritability can create distance from loved ones, while a lack of energy or emotional bandwidth can lead professionals to isolate themselves. Professionals often experience tension in their closest relationships, especially when partners or family members did not fully understand the nature or emotional impact of their work. When not addressed, these interpersonal strains can contribute to a sense of loneliness, further exacerbating emotional distress and reducing the support professionals most need to remain resilient.

### **1.3 Why is Vicarious Trauma Important for Professionals to Understand, Prevent, and Address?**

Understanding vicarious trauma is not merely an academic or peripheral concern – it is a fundamental ethical and professional responsibility for individuals and institutions supporting victims of trafficking. These professionals often operate in emotionally demanding environments, where they must hold space for others' pain without always seeing immediate resolution. As such, recognizing the potential for internalizing this trauma is critical.

On a personal level, professionals with vicarious trauma may experience:

- Changes in their worldview, such as loss of trust in others or diminished sense of safety.
- Strained interpersonal relationships, irritability with loved ones, or emotional withdrawal.
- A reduced ability to find joy in everyday life or maintain healthy self-care habits.

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[7]Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

On a professional level, the impacts of vicarious trauma may include:

- Decreased motivation or engagement with cases.
- Difficulty maintaining healthy emotional boundaries with clients.
- Increased risk of ethical misjudgment or reactive decision-making.
- Higher rates of absenteeism, turnover, or departure from the field.

Understanding the impacts of vicarious trauma goes beyond individual well-being; it has direct implications for service quality and team sustainability. The effects of trauma exposure can extend beyond the workplace, influencing mental health, personal relationships, and one's ongoing sense of purpose.

These outcomes directly affect the care provided by professionals to trafficking victims. Supporting the recovery and reintegration of trafficking victims requires emotional stability and clarity from professionals. A trauma-informed work culture acknowledges that supporting others begins with supporting those who do the work.

Without institutional support and trauma-informed practices, the risk of mutual re-traumatization—of both clients and service providers—significantly increases.

Early identification of vicarious trauma symptoms is essential for preserving the mental and emotional health of professionals. Warning signs such as chronic exhaustion, emotional detachment, persistent sadness, or a growing sense of cynicism should not be normalized or dismissed. Intervening at an early stage allows for the implementation of effective coping strategies, access to supervision or peer support, and adjustments in workload or responsibilities. By addressing symptoms promptly, professionals are more likely to sustain their well-being and avoid long-term consequences such as burnout, depression, or disengagement from the field.

Ultimately, the quality of care provided to trafficking victims is directly tied to the well-being of those offering it. When professionals are emotionally depleted or overwhelmed by unprocessed secondary trauma, their capacity to offer consistent, empathetic, and ethically sound support diminishes. Institutions must recognize that investing in the resilience of their staff is also an investment in the recovery and empowerment of the individuals they serve. Prioritizing trauma awareness, proactive support systems, and healthy boundaries is not optional – it is a cornerstone of sustainable and effective practice in the anti-trafficking field.

## 2. Challenges in Preventing and Addressing Vicarious Trauma

Working closely with trafficking victims demands emotional presence, empathy, and commitment, which often places professionals in a position of vulnerability to cumulative stress and trauma. Despite growing awareness of vicarious trauma, many challenges still prevent effective prevention and response. These obstacles are not only personal but also systemic and inherent to the nature of trauma-exposed work.

### 2.1 Personal Challenges

On a personal level, many professionals who work with trafficking victims feel a deep sense of purpose and compassion. However, lack of personal boundaries, inadequate attention to self-care, and insufficient emotional support from friends or family can increase susceptibility to vicarious trauma.<sup>8</sup> The pressure to "always be available" or the belief that caring for oneself is selfish may lead to chronic stress and emotional depletion.

Moreover, professionals may normalize exhaustion or emotional numbness, interpreting these symptoms as part of the job rather than early signs of trauma exposure. Individuals often deny or minimize their distress, fearing it may be seen as weakness. In so doing, they delay seeking support and allow symptoms to escalate, which can result in burnout or the deterioration of personal well-being and relationships.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.2 Systemic and Structural Challenges

At the institutional level, structural barriers often prevent early recognition and response to vicarious trauma. Many organizations that work with trafficking survivors operate with limited funding, leading to staff shortages, high caseloads, and unrealistic expectations. This systemic overburdening leaves little space for reflection, emotional processing, or adequate supervision.<sup>10</sup>

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[8] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

[9] Hughes, M. (2022) 'A vulnerability for people who combat human trafficking', Psychology Today.

[10] IACP (n.d.) Vicarious Trauma Response Initiative. Alexandria: International Association of Chiefs of Police.

In addition, institutions may lack the frameworks to identify or address trauma in their staff before it reaches a critical stage. Often, vicarious trauma is not recognized or named until it manifests as burnout or staff turnover. Many professionals report that their organizations only acknowledged the emotional toll of their work after clear signs of distress appeared, rather than through proactive and preventive mechanisms. The absence of trauma-informed leadership or structured debriefing practices creates a culture where emotional overload is silently endured.<sup>11</sup>

### **2.3 Challenges Linked to Work with Vulnerable Persons**

Working with vulnerable populations, especially individuals who have endured trafficking, means hearing intense stories of suffering, violation, and loss, often on a regular basis. While professionals are trained to remain empathetic and composed, it is important to remember that they, too, are human. Constant exposure to others' trauma without adequate care practices can lead to emotional fatigue, compassion erosion, and disconnection from their own needs and emotions.<sup>12</sup>

The emotional cost of caring accumulates over time. Without healthy routines, peer connection, and supportive environments, professionals risk becoming overwhelmed. In trauma-exposed work, being resilient is not only about endurance, but also about knowing when and how to rest, reflect, and reach out.

Working with children and adolescents who have experienced trafficking introduces additional emotional complexity for professionals. Listening to the stories of exploited children and adolescents can evoke intense feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness, or moral distress. For many practitioners, there is a heightened emotional response when trauma involves children and adolescents, especially when cases reflect systemic failures to protect them. Professionals may internalize these emotions more deeply, feeling responsible not only for the child's recovery but for the injustices that led to their exploitation. This perceived responsibility can lead to emotional over-identification, blurred boundaries, and long-term emotional exhaustion if not properly managed.<sup>13</sup>

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[11] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

[12] Hughes, M. (2022) 'A vulnerability for people who combat human trafficking', Psychology Today and Surtees, R. and L.S. Johnson (2021) Recovery and reintegration of trafficking victims: A practitioner guide. Washington, D.C.: NEXUS Institute and Regional Support Office of the Bali Process (RSO).

[13] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

Moreover, work with children and adolescents often requires navigating ongoing family dynamics, legal uncertainties, and social service systems, all of which can be unpredictable and slow-moving. Professionals may feel caught between protecting a child and advocating within systems that are not always trauma-informed or responsive. It is important to emphasize that children and adolescents require sustained, individualized support, which can intensify the emotional labor for service providers. Without appropriate supervision, training, and emotional outlets, practitioners may feel overwhelmed or powerless, especially when confronted with repeated cycles of abuse or lack of progress. These challenges underscore the need for specialized support structures for professionals working with youth survivors, including targeted mental health resources, peer consultation, and policies that acknowledge the emotional toll of such work.<sup>14</sup>

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[14] Surtees, R. and L.S. Johnson (2021) Recovery and reintegration of trafficking victims: A practitioner guide. Washington, D.C.: NEXUS Institute and Regional Support Office of the Bali Process (RSO).

### 3. Solutions and Strategies: Professionals and the Practice of Self-care

Preventing and managing vicarious trauma requires more than awareness; it demands intentional, sustained self-care practices. In high-empathy, high-intensity fields such as anti-trafficking work, professionals must actively protect their emotional health, just as they protect the well-being of their clients. Self-care is not a luxury or individual indulgence, it is a professional competency that sustains ethical, effective, and compassionate engagement over time.

Solutions and strategies include:

- Setting professional boundaries
- Asking for and accepting help
- Using practical techniques
- Recognizing emotions and self-knowledge
- Seeking therapy and external resources

#### Setting Professional Boundaries

Establishing clear emotional and professional boundaries is a foundational skill for reducing exposure to vicarious trauma. Many professionals struggle with guilt when they set boundaries. However, maintaining boundaries is critical for professionals to be well and effective in the long-term. Service providers who lack boundaries often take their work home (mentally and emotionally) leading to sleep disruptions, difficulty being present with loved ones, and chronic stress. Boundaries may include setting limits on case-related communication outside work hours, emotionally detaching after intense sessions, or identifying signs of overidentification with clients.<sup>15</sup>

Professionals should not feel pressured to be constantly available or to internalize their clients' pain in order to prove their dedication. Organizations should encourage and normalize professional boundary-setting as part of a trauma-informed workplace culture.

Organizations must be equipped to recognize and respond to vicarious trauma to protect the well-being of their teams and ensure ethical, effective care for survivors.<sup>16</sup>

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[15] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

[16] IACP (n.d.) Vicarious Trauma Response Initiative. Alexandria: International Association of Chiefs of Police.

## Asking for and Accepting Help

Feeling isolated in their distress, unsure whether their emotional responses are “normal” or if seeking support might be perceived as weakness.<sup>17</sup> Normalizing conversations around vicarious trauma within teams can foster a culture where emotional support is accessible and expected.

It’s also important to recognize that the individuals to which someone is closest to (partners, family, or friends) often notice early warning signs before the individual does. Irritability, withdrawal, or lack of emotional availability may be more visible to others. Being open to feedback and accepting help from loved ones and viewing their concern as an act of care, not criticism, can help professionals recognize when it’s time to pause, reflect, and take action. Professionals often report change after someone close expresses concern about their emotional state.<sup>18</sup>

Regular peer consultation, team debriefs, and reflective supervision are vital spaces where professionals can process emotional content, gain perspective, and reduce feelings of isolation. Professionals expressed a strong need for “safe spaces” to talk openly about how their work was affecting them—not just professionally, but personally.

## Using Practical Techniques

Practical, accessible techniques can significantly reduce the accumulation of stress. These may include breathing exercises, mindfulness, journaling, grounding techniques, or taking structured breaks throughout the workday. Even small, consistent practices can regulate the nervous system and interrupt emotional overload.

These same grounding tools can also be taught to clients, doubling as opportunities for professionals to practice them themselves. Engaging in parallel healing, where both survivor and supporter benefit from trauma-informed tools, can reinforce the importance of shared regulation and resilience in the recovery process.<sup>19</sup>

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[17] Hughes, M. (2022) ‘A vulnerability for people who combat human trafficking’, Psychology Today.

[18] Glenn, V.H. (2022) Vicarious trauma experienced by human trafficking victim service providers (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Minneapolis: Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

[19] Surtees, R. and L.S. Johnson (2021) Recovery and reintegration of trafficking victims: A practitioner guide. Washington, D.C.: NEXUS Institute and Regional Support Office of the Bali Process (RSO).

## Examples of practical techniques to reduce stress<sup>20</sup>

**“5-4-3-2-1” grounding technique** can help professionals reconnect with the present moment by naming 5 things they can see, 4 they can feel, 3 they can hear, 2 they can smell, and 1 they can taste.

**Box breathing (inhale 4 seconds, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4)**, can be done discreetly during moments of tension and helps reset the body’s stress response.

**Two-Minute Pause**, this is a quick and simple practice that allows the nervous system to reset during a stressful moment. For example: Step away from your desk or take a quiet moment, close your eyes (if comfortable), take three deep breaths, and notice how your body feels. Allow yourself to be still for just two minutes, without checking your phone or responding to tasks. This small pause creates mental space, lowers immediate stress levels, and helps you return to your work with greater clarity and calm.

**Name It to Tame It (Emotional Labeling)**, originating from emotional neuroscience, this technique involves naming what you’re feeling in order to reduce the emotional intensity. For example: when experiencing emotional discomfort, pause and say (either silently or out loud): “I’m feeling frustrated,” “This is anxiety,” or “I feel overwhelmed.” By identifying and labeling the emotion, the brain activates areas involved in regulation and reasoning, which helps calm the stress response and restore a sense of control.

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[20] Counselling Tutor (2023) Trauma-Informed Grounding Techniques for Counsellors; Nook, E. C., Satpute, A. B., & Ochsner, K. N. (2021) Emotion naming impedes both cognitive reappraisal and mindful acceptance strategies of emotion regulation. *Affective Science*, 2(2), 187–198; Verywell Mind (2024) Feeling Anxious? Try the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique; and Zeidan, F., Johnson, S. K., Diamond, B. J., & David, Z. (2010) Mindfulness meditation improves cognition: Evidence of brief mental training. *Consciousness and cognition*, 19(2), 597–605.

## **Recognizing Emotions and Self-Knowledge**

Taking the time to identify how you feel, without judgment, can help you understand how the trauma of others is affecting you. Ask yourself honestly: What am I feeling? Why? How is my body reacting to these emotions? This process of self-awareness will allow you to detect early signs of emotional overload. If you don't know how to start recognizing your emotions or exploring your inner world, you are not alone. Seeking professional help, e.g. from a psychologist or a specialized therapist, is an act of care and strength.

## **Seeking Therapy and External Resources**

Finally, engaging in personal therapy or external support systems is often essential—especially when working on deeply traumatic issues like human trafficking. Therapy offers a confidential space to process difficult cases, address emotional fatigue, and receive guidance for managing stressors. Professionals working with extreme human suffering must acknowledge their own limits and prioritize mental health maintenance in the same way they would advise it to their clients.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond therapy, professionals can benefit from support networks outside of the workplace, including friends, mentors, or community groups that allow them to reconnect with aspects of their identity not tied to their professional role. These external anchors provide emotional renewal, perspective, and human connection that are essential for long-term sustainability in trauma-exposed work.

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[21] Hughes, M. (2022) 'A vulnerability for people who combat human trafficking', Psychology Today.

## RESOURCES

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Counselling Tutor (2023) Trauma-Informed Grounding Techniques for Counsellors. Available at: <https://counsellingtutor.com/trauma-informed-practice/trauma-grounding-techniques/>

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IACP (n.d.) Vicarious Trauma Response Initiative. Alexandria: International Association of Chiefs of Police. Available at: <https://www.theiacp.org/projects/vicarious-trauma-response-initiative>

Hughes, M. (2022) 'A vulnerability for people who combat human trafficking', Psychology Today. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/end-human-trafficking/202204/vulnerability-people-who-combat-human-trafficking>

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