



Secondary Trauma and the Courts

*“The expectation that we can be
immersed in suffering and loss daily
and not be touched by it
is as unrealistic as expecting to walk through water
without getting wet.”*

- Rachel Naomi Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom 1996¹

Witnessing family tragedies, hearing stories of violence, and listening to difficult testimonies are recurring and persistent experiences for judicial officers and practitioners working in the justice system. In fact, 63 percent of judges have at least one symptom of vicarious trauma² and 50 percent of child protection staff experience high or very high levels of compassion fatigue.³ It is easy to see how these daily interactions with individuals, children, and families who are reliving trauma takes an emotional toll on justice system practitioners and places them at high risk for experiencing secondary trauma.

WHAT IS SECONDARY TRAUMA?

Secondary trauma is frequently referred to as vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress. Definitions of secondary trauma vary, but most describe it as the impact of indirect exposure to traumatic events that can be disruptive and painful and can persist for months or years.⁴ Many helping professionals develop cognitive, emotional, physical, and behavioral symptoms of trauma as a result of working with individuals exposed to trauma. A growing body of evidence suggests that secondary trauma is an inevitable occupational hazard for any professional working with survivors of trauma and violence.

1 Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal (1996), <http://www.rachelremen.com/books/kitchen-table-wisdom/>

2 <https://www.judgemiketown.com/vicarious-trauma-in-judges-the-personal-challenge-of-dispensing-justice/>

3 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6780017_Compassion_fatigue_burnout_and_compassion_satisfaction_among_Colorado_child_protection_workers#:~:text=In%20a%20study%20conducted%20in,Kellar%2DGuenther%2C%202006\)%20](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6780017_Compassion_fatigue_burnout_and_compassion_satisfaction_among_Colorado_child_protection_workers#:~:text=In%20a%20study%20conducted%20in,Kellar%2DGuenther%2C%202006)%20)

4 McCann, I. L., & Pearlman, L. A. (1990). Vicarious traumatization: A framework for understanding the psychological effects of working with victims. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 3(1), 131–149. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00975140>

IMPACTS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR COURTS

Most courts have little training or resources to respond to secondary trauma. If left unaddressed, secondary trauma may have an adverse effect on the ability of practitioners and systems to effectively work with individuals, children, and families. Other potential negative justice system effects include increased absenteeism, lower productivity, higher staff turnover, and decreased morale. Justice systems that aim to be trauma-informed must recognize and understand the impact of secondary trauma on judges, employees, and other practitioners in the system.

From there, courts should focus on developing a justice system culture that mitigates the effects of working with survivors of trauma and violence. This type of culture serves as a foundation to implement strategies to address secondary trauma on both the systemic and individual practitioner levels.

Court leaders must also commit to fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies and procedures, as well as implementing secondary trauma prevention and intervention strategies. Some of the strategies to consider include:

- Adopting policies that promote self-care
- Ensuring a safe work environment
- Providing secondary trauma education
- Establishing peer mentoring programs
- Offering supportive services
- Setting manageable work and caseload expectations

IMPACTS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS

Individuals affected by secondary trauma respond in various ways, but the common and often inevitable impact is a change in their worldview. Although anyone working with victims of trauma and violence is at risk to experience secondary trauma, factors such as individual trauma history, inadequate personal and professional support systems, historical trauma shared by communities, and minimal experience in the job may make individuals more vulnerable. Conversely, individual resilience, well-developed coping strategies, and established support systems may contribute to individuals experiencing no or minimal impact from exposure to the work-related trauma.



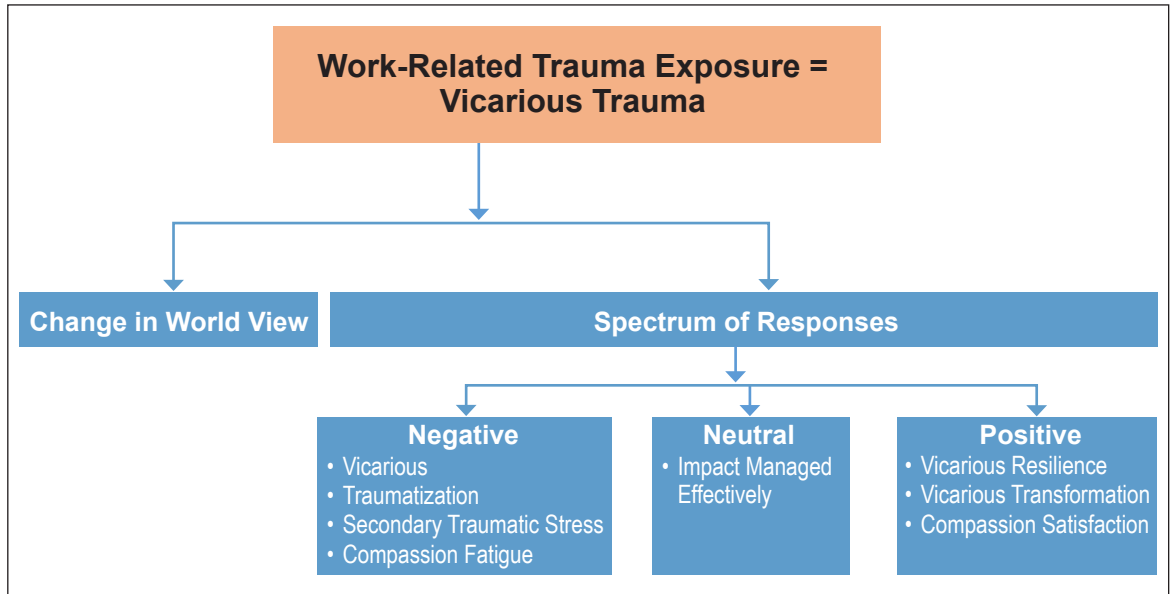
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More recently developed concepts of *secondary resilience* and *compassion satisfaction* refer to potentially positive effects of exposure to trauma in practitioners who witness the capacity to heal and the ability to overcome adversity in survivors of trauma and violence. The positive effects include personal growth; increased belief in possibility of recovery; strengthened resilience; and increased commitment to the work.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA TOOLKIT MODEL



Office for Victims of Crime, What is Trauma? <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-vicarious-trauma>

Individual practitioners can reduce the risk of negative effects from secondary trauma by:

- Focusing on self-care
- Learning coping strategies
- Asking for help and accessing peer support groups
- Seeking professional support
- Recognizing positive aspects of working with victims of trauma

Part of having a trauma-informed court is nurturing a healthy and safe working environment. Training for court professionals on the impact of trauma must include secondary trauma. Creating a court culture that helps build resiliency and is supportive of self-care will lead to better job satisfaction and better outcomes for those who come in contact with the justice system.

Research

1. Compendium of Resources, <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/compendium-resources>
2. The Secondary Effects of Helping Others: A Comprehensive Bibliography of 2,017 Scholarly Publications, https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/vt_bibliography_on_vt_sts-508.pdf

Toolkits

1. Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/child-welfare-trauma-training-toolkit>
2. Office for Victims of Crime, What is Vicarious Trauma? <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-vicarious-trauma>
3. Vicarious Trauma Institute, <https://vicarioustrauma.com/whatis.html>
4. Secondary Traumatic Stress, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/secondary-traumatic-stress>

Organizational and Individual Tools

1. The Vicarious Trauma Organizational Readiness Guide (VT-ORG), <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-the-vt-org>
2. Making the Business Case for a Vicarious Trauma-Informed Organization, https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/imp_making_the_business_case-508.pdf
3. ProQOL measure of negative and positive effects of helping those who experience suffering and trauma, ProQOL <https://proqol.org/>
4. Organizational Factors Leading to Vicarious Trauma or Burnout, https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/rf_organizational_factors_leading_to_vicarious_trauma_or_burnout-508.pdf
5. Historical Trauma and Cultural Healing, UMN Extension, <https://extension.umn.edu/trauma-and-healing/historical-trauma-and-cultural-healing>
6. SAMHSA, Tips for Healthcare Professionals: Coping with Stress and Compassion Fatigue, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Tips-for-Healthcare-Professionals-Coping-with-Stress-and-Compassion-Fatigue/PEP20-01-01-016>

Courts/Child Welfare/Juvenile Justice

1. Secondary or Vicarious Trauma Among Judges and Court Personnel, <https://cdm16501.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/hr/id/171>
2. How to Maintain Emotional Health When Working with Trauma, <https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/ab1058-wellness-handout2.pdf>
3. Vicarious Trauma Primer for the Juvenile Court Practitioner, https://youthrightsjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/reader-archive/Juvenile_Law_Reader_13-3.pdf

4. Secondary Traumatic Stress: A Fact Sheet for Child-Serving Professionals, https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/secondary_traumatic_stress_child_serving_professionals.pdf
5. Secondary Trauma and Child Welfare Staff: Guidance for Supervisors and Administrators, https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/secondary_trauma_child_welfare_staff_guidance_for_supervisors.pdf
6. The Power of Compassion in the Court: Healing on Both Sides of the Bench, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1651&context=ajacourtreview>

Training

1. Vicarious Trauma and Resilience, https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/vt_vt_and_resilience_training-508.pdf



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