

VICARIOUS TRAUMATISATION

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The exceptional circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have doubly impacted people living with cancer, and those who care for and support them.

Greater vulnerability due to weakened immune systems, deferred treatments and increased risks attached to urgent treatments, as well as the prevalence of bad news everywhere, have hugely raised anxiety levels, and created much extra emotional as well as physical distress.

This information has been specially created to offer immediate support to ALL those who are involved in supporting people living with cancer or those approaching the end of their lives *and* their loved ones.

Whether you are a Macmillan Healthcare professional, a volunteer, or a family member, this information is to help and support YOU. For simplicity, we will call everyone 'helpers'.

A simple message for all helpers! Helpers are just as important as the people you help. In order to keep caring for others, helpers must know how to and properly take care of *themselves!* But helpers often forget to consider their own needs... which means they often keep going until they keel over.

What we all need to understand about empathy.

As helpers, we are typically naturally empathic; this means being able to easily imagine what is going on for someone. It is as if emotionally we also 'feel someone's pain'.

This empathic connection is one of the most powerful elements of the comfort and support felt by a person living with cancer.

But, this empathic connection with other people's pain - either in a single moment, or cumulatively over time – can take a very heavy toll on the helper.

Why? Because 'Mirror Neurons' in the helper's brain actually re-create the same neural and bodily processes as in the person who is suffering or distressed and can result in what is called 'vicarious traumatisation' (or VT).

The tricky part, is that not only is it impossible for helpers to 'switch off' their empathy, but they would not wish to... Being empathic feels essential to what we do and who we are!

So, helpers and where relevant the organisations they work for, need to be able to recognise the signs of vicarious traumatisation and know what to do about it...

Some of the signs of Vicarious Traumatisation are:

- Feeling useless at your job or powerless to help others
- Feeling a lack of hope or meaning in what you are doing
- Feeling obsessed by the person you are helping or desperately wanting to avoid them
- Having intrusive thoughts or dreams
- Feeling overly anxious about your own loved ones
- Feeling increasingly disconnected and isolating yourself from others
- Feeling a lack of motivation for everyday life and self-care



If you recognise one or more of these signs, please speak to someone you trust who might be able to support you. We would also recommend that you speak to your Line Manager.

Knowing the signs of VT and putting in place the self-care that will help build resilience, will reduce your risk of developing VT.

It is also important to know that vicarious traumatisation is **NOT the same as burnout**. Burnout comes from doing too much for too long – and can be experienced by ANYONE and has nothing to do with empathy or trauma. But VT and burnout can and often do go together - as helpers experiencing VT can also be physically and mentally exhausted.

The good news is that what helps people to recover from VT is also good for preventing or reducing burnout!

Self-care for Vicarious Traumatisation

Research shows that *doing* the following things on a regular basis can make a big difference. These actions can help helpers become more resilient to developing VT in the first place – and importantly also help them to recover from VT.

- 1) **Take more time to notice what you are feeling**, right here, right now. *Get out of your head!*
- 2) **Treat yourself like you would treat your own best friend** – notice your inner critical voice and try to replace him or her with a compassionate inner best friend. *Be kind to yourself.*
- 3) **Stay connected to other people** – at home and at work – to ensure that you are not becoming isolated or unsupported. Talk to someone you trust about the impact of helping someone living with cancer. Consider support lines that may be able to support you if appropriate.
- 4) **Try to ensure that you have a reasonable balance between the time that you give to others and time for yourself** – and if not, *make more time for you.*
- 5) **Plan and practise active self-care in THREE important and different ways:**
Doing these three things helps to increase good body chemicals and get rid of bad stress chemicals.
They enable you to **Ground, Release, Recharge your energy (GRR)**.
 - **When you are helping others, stay grounded** in your body, feeling your feet firmly on the ground, consciously breathing and centring yourself.
 - **Release the pain** that you take inside yourself from others. This can be done through any regular aerobic exercise, like running, dancing, singing, virtual workouts, even shouting at sporting events on TV. This will release stored adrenalin and stress from your lungs and body (Animals do it instinctively: think of a Zebra shivering when the lion has moved on).
 - **Re-charge your connection to life** and generate good body chemicals by spending time connecting with friends and loved ones virtually, with pets, through play at home, being out in nature within the guidelines, having fun and creative or spiritual activities at home.

Doing these things will help you to build resilience to developing vicarious trauma. They will help you to stay well – both for you and for the people you help.

An important additional way to reduce anxiety to stay strong and well, in this time of COVID-19, is to practise *bad news distancing*. Bad news feeds anxiety and anxiety lowers resilience and makes you more prone to vicarious traumatisation. Avoiding too much bad news helps us all to maintain good mental health.

If you recognise any of the signs of VT in this information, it is important that you speak about this straight away with someone you trust who might be able to support you.

We would also recommend that you speak with your Line Manager, who is in a position to help you put in place the things which will support you to recover and feel well and happy once again.

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References:

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Van Dernoot Lipsky, L. (2009), *Trauma Stewardship. An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*; Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco

Dan Siegel (On the neuroscientific basis of empathy) -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnvSRvmRlgA&list=PLDCtwyPSjhlNEz4xuzxt6Tdsnyt2vChiB&index=6>

Brene Brown (Empathy) - On empathy (3 mins): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

Kristin Neff (Self-compassion TedTalk): 'The space between self-esteem and self-Compassion' -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvZBUSplr4>