

# Signs and Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma\*

**Changes in worldview or frame of reference** – Vicarious trauma changes the way you think about the world and yourself. The following areas related to worldview are particularly likely to be challenged and changed:

- *Changes in spirituality* (e.g., changes in beliefs regarding meaning, purpose, causality, connection, hope, and faith). This often takes the form of questioning prior beliefs and the meaning and purpose in life. In turn, this can be connected to a sense of loss of purpose, hopelessness, and cynicism.
- *Changes in identity* (e.g., changes in the way you practice or think about important identities as a professional, friend, or family member). You could, for example, find that most of your time and energy is spent in your professional role because you feel disconnected from or uncomfortable in your other roles or identities
- *Changes in beliefs related to major psychological needs* (e.g., beliefs regarding safety, control, trust, esteem, and intimacy). For example, changes in how vulnerable you believe you, and others that you care about, are to harm. In turn, these beliefs can influence your thoughts (e.g., worrying about safety issues, mistrust of strangers) and actions (e.g., being more protective of your children).

## Physical & psychological signs

- Hyper-arousal symptoms (e.g., nightmares, sleep difficulties, difficulty concentrating, heart palpitations, hyper-vigilance)
- Repeated thoughts or mental images of traumatic events, especially when trying not to think about it
- Feeling numb
- Feeling unable to tolerate strong emotions
- Increased sensitivity to violence
- Cynicism
- Generalized despair and hopelessness, and loss of idealism
- Guilt regarding your own survival and/or pleasure
- Anger
- Disgust
- Fear

## Behavior & relationship signs

- Difficulty setting boundaries and separating work from personal life
- Feeling like you never have time or energy for yourself.
- Feeling disconnected from loved ones, even when communicating with them
- Increased conflict in relationships
- General social withdrawal
- Numbing or avoidance of efforts to elicit or work with traumatic material or clients.
- Decreased interest in activities that used to bring pleasure, enjoyment, or relaxation
- Irritable, intolerant, agitated, impatient, needy, and/or moody
- Increased dependencies on nicotine, alcohol, food, sex, shopping, internet, and/or drugs
- Intimacy problems including sexual difficulties
- Impulsivity

\* - These symptoms, although indicative of VT, can also stem from other unrelated issues.

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