

# Guidelines for a Vicarious Trauma-Informed Organization

## Making the Business Case

### WHAT IS A VICARIOUS TRAUMA-INFORMED ORGANIZATION?

Vicarious trauma (VT), the exposure to the trauma experiences of others, is an occupational challenge for the fields of victim services, emergency medical services, fire services, law enforcement, and others. Working with victims of violence and trauma changes the worldview of responders and puts individuals and organizations at risk for a range of negative consequences (Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton, 2003; McCann and Pearlman, 1990; Newell and MacNeil, 2010; Vicarious Trauma Institute, 2015; Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995; Knight, 2013). A **vicarious trauma-informed organization** recognizes these challenges and proactively addresses the impact of vicarious trauma through policies, procedures, practices, and programs.

**For more information on vicarious trauma and its effects, visit <https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/>.**

### The Organizational Impact of Vicarious Trauma

The impact of VT on organizations can be linked to three primary business concerns: productivity, staff turnover, and organizational health.

#### Productivity

Exposure to VT can erode your staff's ability to do their jobs effectively (Newell and MacNeil, 2010; Knight, 2013)—in particular, their ability to make decisions. Across the disciplines mentioned above, exposure to VT can increase employees' stress levels and cause or heighten depression which, when sustained over time, lessens your employees' complex decisionmaking abilities. Both motivation and performance suffer, often resulting in mistakes in judgment, poor response time, and an inability to connect with and relate to others when it is needed most. Increased stress levels also have physical effects on individuals. These may include increased

fatigue, irritability, lack of self-care, and negative attitudes toward their work, colleagues, and clients (Stebnicki, 2012). Given the level of empathy and resilience needed for trauma-focused work, VT can severely impede your staff's ability to consistently deliver high-quality services.

#### Staff Turnover

Turnover is one of the most visible effects of VT on organizations (Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton, 2003; Middleton and Potter, 2015). The loss of employees on any regular basis has significant side effects, including the expenses related to both the time and resources needed to find and train replacements for those who leave. The issue of staff retention is most challenging when the individuals who leave are the organization's most experienced employees—those who are adept at handling the toughest and most complex cases and who often lead and mentor others.

#### Organizational Health

While the individual costs of VT can profoundly affect staff members' productivity and their delivery of services to those in need, the organizational costs are also significant. Those who experience the negative effects of VT can adversely impact team cohesion, communication, collaboration, and coordinated responses (Knight, 2013). The impact of unaddressed VT can corrode the internal workings of your organization by lowering morale, increasing absenteeism and tardiness, undermining authority, and reducing the quality and timeliness of client care and employees' administrative responsibilities (Newell and MacNeil, 2010; Knight, 2013; Stamm, 1997).

### Conclusion

It is clear from the research that a concerted focus on addressing the impact of VT is key to promoting staff well-being and retention, organizational effectiveness, and quality service delivery. Becoming a vicarious trauma-informed organization is, therefore, a sound business practice.

## References

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