

MANAGING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

A recent employment case has placed vicarious trauma in the spotlight. **AMANDA WALLIS** describes what it is, how to identify roles particularly prone to it, and how to ameliorate risk of harm.



Content warning: This article mentions suicide and other potentially traumatic themes.

Recent news stories have highlighted the legal hot water facing employers who fail to monitor psychosocial risk and reduce mental harm at work. Two counsellors from a Hamilton high school were paid out nearly \$1.8 million because of mismanaged exposure to traumatic events during their employment between 1996 and 2012.

During their tenure, the counsellors were required to provide psychological support for students and staff affected by more than 30 deaths. Many of these deaths were by suicide, requiring round-the-clock support for members of the school community. This prolonged stress, combined with insufficient workplace support, resulted in dual diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

WHAT IS VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

Vicarious trauma (otherwise known as secondary trauma) refers to the snowballing

negative effects resulting from indirect exposure to traumatic experiences. Through being immersed in the distressing details of a traumatic event, people can develop their own trauma response even without having personally experienced the initiating event.

The school counsellors who provided support to grieving staff, students and family members were regularly exposed to high levels of distress. Their resulting trauma, built up over more than a decade, significantly affected their health and their ability to function well day-to-day.

Understanding what makes something “traumatic” can help us to understand the occupations most at risk. Traumatic events are generally considered extraordinarily stressful, are often unexpected, cause us to feel powerless, and can make us question our sense of safety and security. Examples include homicide, assault, suicide, traffic accidents, workplace violence, and natural disasters.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Because of the nature of their work – being exposed

to illness, death, violence, or crime – first responders and health professionals are at high risk of vicarious trauma. But the ripple effect of a traumatic event can be widespread and long-lived, implicating those in other occupations too, including the justice sector (eg courtroom staff and lawyers), mental health professionals, journalists, and call centre staff (eg responding to insurance queries in the aftermath of severe weather events).

At a personal level, risk factors include – but are not limited to – lacking a solid support system, tending to avoid tough emotions, having high empathy, pouring a lot of yourself into your work, or having experienced trauma previously.

All that being said, trauma is complicated and different people will respond in different ways.

HOW TO REDUCE RISK?

Beyond personal factors, the biggest risk factor for vicarious trauma in the workplace is a work culture that does not prioritise psychological wellbeing. An informed workplace would recognise secondary trauma as a challenge and would take responsibility to address its impact with policies, procedures and practices.

In the case of the two school counsellors who suffered harm, the Court ruled that their employer had failed to identify

and assess psychological hazards at work and then failed to manage those hazards effectively.

To manage psychological hazards (otherwise known as psychosocial hazards), employers need to have a strong system in place to identify sources of stress at work. This should be through both formal (eg survey) and informal channels (eg check-ins), all the while ensuring that workers feel safe to raise concerns and that their concerns will be acted on.

In the case of workers who are at risk of vicarious trauma, employers might ensure that tasks involving traumatic material are distributed evenly across teams and do not unfairly fall on one or two key roles. Managers should be trained and empowered to have conversations early and often, and to make accommodations where needed (eg enabling time away from work). And psychological support and supervision should be provided proactively, not just when harm has occurred.

The exact “solution” will look different in every case. The good news is that the actions that reduce vicarious trauma are usually the very same actions that make your organisation a good place to work. So, as well as reducing legal risk, people are likely to stay in their jobs longer, work to a higher level, and feel healthier overall.

THE BIGGEST RISK FACTOR FOR VICARIOUS TRAUMA IN THE WORKPLACE IS A WORK CULTURE THAT DOES NOT PRIORITISE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING.

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