



Member Resource Committee Stress/Trauma Working Group

Management Detection and Mitigation of Stress, Vicarious Trauma, and Burnout in Forensic Practitioners

Stress, vicarious trauma, and burn-out are not necessarily independent of each other and may overlap. The mitigation and timely detection of stress, vicarious trauma, and burn-out in forensic practitioners are critical for the individual's well-being and the employer's retention of productive employees. Detection and mitigation are no easy task in the uniquely variable forensic science environment, which provides consistent exposure to work-related stressors and potentially traumatic experiences. While there is no one-size-fits-all checklist to identify the build-up of stressors or vicarious trauma, diligent supervisors can learn to observe the behavior and emotional changes in their employees that tend to indicate an adverse impact of stress and vicarious trauma.

Stress occurs when our needs are not met. The body's stress response is designed to enable people to react quickly to threatening situations but does a poor job deciphering between threat levels and could potentially be triggered all day long. When stress is repetitively experienced in day-to-day activities or following a traumatic event, it can create unhealthy effects. Therefore, chronic stress can cause physical, emotional, and mental tension as a result of responding to consistent stressors or experiences. Chronic stress may be displayed by reactionary communication, decreased immunity, health problems, pain, anxiety, depression, and reduced productivity. An employee enduring stressful situations may get upset quickly when difficult situations arise unexpectedly, find it challenging to cope with job tasks, or feel that they are not on top of their responsibilities.

Vicarious trauma differs from stress in that it may result from incidental or sustained exposure to the trauma and suffering of other people. Vicarious trauma can be the result of empathetic engagement with other's trauma, leading to sensory and psychological impact. Forensic practitioners are exposed to other's trauma from repeated access to crime scenes, police reports, medical reports, digital imagery, testimony, victim accounts, and physical evidence. An individual experiencing work-related vicarious trauma may find it difficult to separate their personal life from their work life. They may feel 'on edge' about work experiences or depressed because of circumstances encountered working in forensics. A person experiencing vicarious trauma may also avoid certain activities or situations due to experiences encountered in casework. Vicarious trauma can change a person's frame of reference.

The World Health Organization defines burn-out as an occupational phenomenon and syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that is not managed. An employee in burn-out suffers persistent frustrations with the work environment that causes changes in body, mind, behavior, and emotions. Examples sources of burn-out include lack of coping tools for chronic irritation in response to stress and vicarious trauma, not feeling supported at work and interpersonal situations that produce psychological strain. An individual experiencing burn-out may lose sleep over experiences encountered at work,



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not feel like themselves, get overwhelmed easily because the workload seems endless, or experiences being 'bogged down' by the system. Burn-out can manifest as physical exhaustion, mood swings, increased absenteeism, displays of cynicism and negativity, diminished performance, and loss of empathy.

Supervisors should know their employees, including their: strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, training, experience, caseload, and work history. In the identification of stress, vicarious trauma, and burn-out, one critical detection tool is to have a sense of the employee's "normal." Knowledge of the employee's typical behavior and activities will uniquely position the supervisor to identify subtle and drastic changes in their behavior. Behaviors to understand are an employee's personality when they come in each morning, the people they tend to talk with, everyday annoyances, physical/uniform appearance, workspace habits, routine family functions, available social support, and relaxation activities. Most of these behaviors can be learned over a few minutes each day by talking with the employee about things other than work or observing personnel in a more relaxed state, such as a teamworking event.

Knowing an employee's "normal" is not a stopping point in detection. A willingness to approach employees that are exhibiting behavior outside their typical is also essential. Approaching employees goes beyond asking, "Are you okay?" Instead, detection may require compassionate probing into their response to casework, administrative demands, work-life balance, fluctuations in personal life, and other areas that stress and trauma tend to impact. Additional questions can provide the first step in an employee's recognition or management of stress, vicarious trauma, and burn-out in the workplace.

Another critical detection tool is to teach your employees to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress, trauma, and burn-out. Doing so empowers their mental, physical, and emotional awareness of self and others. Providing opportunities and mechanisms for recognizing signs and symptoms creates an environment where employees can bring their concerns or concerns for others to the supervisor. See Appendix A for a summary of common signs and symptoms of stress, vicarious trauma, and burn-out.

Many methods can help overcome stress and vicarious trauma in ourselves and our teams. Techniques can be applied at the individual, organizational, and systematic levels.

Individuals should be encouraged to develop positive coping mechanisms that may be supported by the organization. Individual self-care plans should consider an all-inclusive approach that enhances well-being through physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and connection focuses. A comprehensive approach would support individuals in different self-care realms.



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Self-care strategies	Examples
Physical	Diet, sleep, exercise
Mental	Resilience, focus, optimism
Spiritual	Purpose, values, service to others
Emotional	Self-regulation, emotional intelligence, crafting responses
Connection	Quality of relationships, nourishment in teams, ability to let go of non-nourishing relationships

An organizational response should help encourage individual self-care and on-going support efforts as well. The Law Enforcement Mental Health and Awareness Act recommended to congress that agencies should increase the mental health resources extended to non-sworn staff, stating "civilian staff must not be forgotten." Crisis hotlines, peer support, and connecting with others regularly to discuss difficult cases are all advocated. Education and training around building resilience have increasingly come into focus for organizations as this develops an individual's ability to bounce back or return to a more balanced state after experiencing stress or trauma. We all have a level of resilience that can become vulnerable, especially if chronic stress or trauma reactions have taken control of the brain and body. However, resilience can be learned, recovered, and improved with practice and awareness. Evidence-based practices that help teach and enhance resilience include mindfulness, gentle movement (such as: walking, yoga, tai chi, qigong), meditation, self-reflection, gratitude, and compassion.

Systematic focus involves getting to the root of the causes of stress and trauma in the organization or culture to remove them when possible. Realistically, many reasons will not be able to be removed, such as deadlines, violent crime scenes, and difficult cases. However, having a supportive environment able to identify stress and trauma in an organization can lead to creative mitigation plans. It is challenging to have those conversations and generate positive momentum from discussions about stress reactions; that is why it is so important to first steer focus toward the wellness of individuals at all levels.



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Appendix A: Symptoms of Stress, Vicarious Trauma, and Burn-out

While each person's reaction to work-related stress and vicarious trauma is unique, below are common signs and symptoms used to identify stress, vicarious trauma, and burn-out in employees. This list is not all-inclusive, and employees may experience other signs and symptoms.

	Stress	Vicarious Trauma	Burn-out
Body	Headaches Pain Digestive Issues Difficulty Sleeping Fatigue	Difficulty Sleeping Exhaustion Easily startled	Chronic fatigue Insomnia Decline in physical health Lack of focus Anxiety Depression
Mind	Anxiety Depression Irritable Restless Lack of focus	Diminished joy Easily startled Angry Rejects closeness Lack of interest Can't stop thinking about work or traumatic material	Loss of enjoyment Pessimism Isolation Detachment
Signs/Actions	Changes to eating habits Emotional outburst Social withdrawal Alcohol/drug use Decreased physical activity	Increased absenteeism or tardiness Changes in relationships Interpersonal conflict Decreased quality	Feelings of apathy and hopelessness Increased irritability Lack of productivity and poor performance.

APPENDIX A REFERENCES:

1. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987>
2. https://www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf?sfvrsn=f0f03a27_2
3. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/high-octane-women/201311/the-tell-tale-signs-burnout-do-you-have-them>



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Appendix B: Additional Resources

The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit (VTT)

The VTT includes tools and resources tailored specifically to the fields of victim services, emergency medical services, fire services, law enforcement, and other allied professionals. The tool kit can help organizations mitigate the potentially harmful effects of vicarious trauma, the exposure to the traumatic experiences of other people.

OVC video on recognizing vicarious trauma in employees:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHewhs_4YMM

Explore the vicarious trauma toolkit:

<https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/>

Workplace Resilience in Forensic Scientists

Just Science Podcast: Just Building Workplace Resiliency

<https://forensiccoe.org/sr-just-building-workforce-resiliency/>

The impact that stress has on a person's mind and body can be dramatic, but the effects are amplified when the stressors involve violent, graphic, or traumatic material. Amy Jeanguenat and Andrew Levin are working to provide support to those affected by this vicarious trauma, with an emphasis on forensic scientists and first responders. Listen along as they discuss stress, mindfulness, and the future of resiliency in this episode of Just Science.

The Evidence Within Lab

<https://www.mindgenllc.com/the-evidence-within-lab>

8- week virtual course for criminal justice professions to combat chronic occupational stress, increase the zone of resilience, and build life-changing habits to improve the quality of work and life.



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Relevant TedX Talks

Drowning in Empathy: The Cost of Vicarious Trauma (Amy Cunningham)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zsaorjlo1Yc>

Discussion of how certain occupational or life circumstances can lead to compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, changing worldviews and behaviors.

The Effects of The Suck it Up Culture (Anthony Guerne)

https://www.ted.com/talks/anthony_guerne_the_effects_of_the_suck_it_up_culture_ptsd_in_emt

Cultures that do not encourage the discussion of occupational traumatic experiences may be leading their employees down a path to PTSD.

Workplace Mental Health- all you need to know (for now) (Tom Oxley)

https://www.ted.com/talks/tom_oxley_workplace_mental_health_all_you_need_to_know_for_now

Leaders in organizations need to talk about mental health in the workplace and train to identify the sign and symptoms.