

**Vicarious Trauma:
What Can Organizations and Managers Do?**

Excerpted by CARE from:

Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma

L.A. Pearlman and L. McKay (2008) Headington Institute www.headington-institute.org

Some humanitarian workers feel that their own organization increases their vicarious trauma instead of helping reduce it! Your organization's policies and practices may be frustrating and make things feel unnecessarily complicated. But it's worth remembering that organizations and managers don't deliberately set out to make life more difficult for you and the people you are trying to help. Sometimes they don't make the best use of the limited time and resources available to them, and this impedes your ability to do your job as well as you'd like. Sometimes they are just facing many competing demands and don't have enough time or resources to do everything with the greatest care and consideration.

However, when humanitarian organizations take an active interest in staff well-being they take a big step toward addressing things that can contribute to vicarious trauma.

Even in crisis situations there is a lot that organizations and management can do to structure work roles and develop organizational cultures that helps lessen vicarious trauma in their staff.

Basic Considerations for Organizations

Here are some basic considerations for organizations. These can lessen the risk of vicarious trauma by helping humanitarian workers feel supported, valued, competent, and connected:

1. Adequate salary and time off (including R & R) for all staff;
2. Sufficient orientation, professional training, and management supervision for staff to feel competent and supported in their jobs;
3. Plans for staff safety (including security training and briefing on security protocols);
4. Access to medical and mental health support services including:
 1. Health insurance;
 2. Information/training about the psychological and spiritual hazards of the work and effective self-care;
 3. Access to good confidential counseling support as needed; and
5. Support for families around issues such as child care, separation, and relocation.

Organizational Culture and Work Roles

In addition, humanitarian workers will benefit from an organizational culture and work roles that are structured in ways that help prevent vicarious trauma by:

1. Encouraging connections, morale, and relationships, perhaps through some or all of the following:
 1. Working in teams;
 2. Providing other avenues to connect with colleagues (e.g., social activities such as having lunch or occasional outings together);
 3. Developing peer support networks.
2. Encouraging communication and staff contributions by:
 1. Providing a voice in decision-making from and feedback to staff at all levels of the organizational hierarchy;
 2. Providing information to help staff understand how and why decisions about resource allocations, deadlines, policies, and assignments are made.
3. Looking for ways to build diversity and job enrichment into the work;
4. Allowing for and actively encouraging staff to take adequate breaks during work.

Think About It

- What are some things your organization already does well to support its staff and help reduce the risk of vicarious trauma?
- Are there some practical things you can think of that your organization could do better to support staff and reduce the risk of vicarious trauma:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ During recruitment? ▪ During orientation? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ During employment? ▪ Upon leaving the organization? |
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What Managers Can Do

Are you a manager? Managers can take many steps to help lessen the impact of vicarious trauma on staff they are supervising. Here are some of them.

1. Understand the psychological and spiritual impact of humanitarian work:
 1. Be alert to how the cumulative exposure to stressful and traumatic situations may be affecting staff.
 2. Regularly check in with staff about how they're coping – do not wait for them to approach you with a problem.
 3. Support staff in seeking counseling or coaching if and when needed.
2. Set a good example in the way that you care for yourself, including:
 1. Work at a sustainable and reasonable pace over time, and encourage staff you supervise to do the same;
 2. Openly value things and people outside of work (e.g., time spent with your family);
 3. Take allocated leave time;
 4. Acknowledge that humanitarian work can be challenging and that healthy work/life balance takes practice and intentionality.
3. Especially during times of increased pressure or crises, look for ways to help staff keep current challenges in perspective by:
 1. Reminding staff of the bigger picture of the organization's mission and purpose, and how this assignment or disaster response fits into that bigger picture; and
 2. Reminding staff of the value the organization places upon them both as people and the organization's most important resources—the staff. Encourage staff to work in sustainable ways. If that does not appear possible in the short-term, encourage them to take extra time after the immediate impact phase is over to rest and regain equilibrium.
4. Express concern for the general well-being of your staff and not just the quality of the work they are doing.
5. Make sure that staff suggestions and feedback about their jobs and the organization are heard and valued – even if you are fairly sure they will not result in tangible change in the near future.
6. Do not say or do things that would stigmatize staff who are struggling with vicarious trauma or other stress or trauma-related issues.
7. Strive to stay positive, and to praise and acknowledge effort and results whenever possible.

Managers can do many things to help lessen the impact of vicarious trauma on staff they are supervising, including being a good example in how they maintain balance and care for themselves.

Think About It

- If you are a manager, what are some things you do well to help lessen the impact of vicarious trauma on your staff? If you aren't a manager, what does your manager do well?
- If you are a manager, what conversations could you have with your staff that would help them identify ways to cope with and transform vicarious trauma?
- What are some things you as a manager (or your manager) could do better to help lessen the impact of vicarious trauma?