

When caring hurts: Recognizing and responding to vicarious trauma

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Every day across Australia, the compassion, empathy and expertise of thousands of social workers and counselors helps people from all walks of life come to terms with personal trauma.

These professionals engage with the grief, pain and fears of their clients, and while such work can be extremely rewarding, there is increasing recognition of the toll it can have on those undertaking it.

A new study, released this week, by UniSA's The Australian Alliance for Social Enterprise and Centacare Catholic Family Services, identifies key measures to help community service workers minimize the effects of vicarious [trauma](#), compassion fatigue and burnout.

Lead researcher Dr. Jonathon Louth says the report, "[Understanding Vicarious Trauma](#)", identifies protective and predictive factors to help workers who regularly assist others in traumatic situations.

"Frontline workers are experiencing high levels of trauma that will impact their everyday lives well into the future," Dr. Louth says.

"They represent a generation of veterans who are not returning from war, but from working within vulnerable communities and families within our cities, suburbs and regions. This situation cannot and should not be ignored."

Through intensive engagement with Centacare staff, Dr. Louth's team identified seven key indicators community service institutions can use to recognize and respond to compassion-based stress.

"Ensuring 'space between' is a really important consideration," Dr. Louth says, "whether that's time between clients, time for lunch, reflection or just chatting with colleagues.

"The boundaries between work and home also need to be protected, and workers need to be supported to better distinguish between their personal and professional lives."

The report recognizes internal culture in the workplace is also a key factor, noting celebrating wins can assist in enhancing and developing resilience in staff, and peer relationships are vital, although care must be taken to ensure traumatic experiences are simply not offloaded onto other staff.

Official recognition of the many dimensions of the issue is also essential, as both appropriate managerial frameworks and relevant funding arrangements are required to ensure concerns about vicarious trauma are not neglected.

"There is also is strong correlation between compassion fatigue and work satisfaction, which suggests appropriate interventions and support encourage healthier, more efficient workplaces," Dr. Louth says.

"Understanding Vicarious Trauma" also notes the excellent example Centacare is setting in the minimization of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue, and the institution's Deputy Director Pauline Connelly says awareness of these issues is essential to their work.

"Centacare's response to caring for staff needs to be as important as caring for the client. If that diminishes, the human element of our work does as well," Ms Connelly says.

More information: Understanding Vicarious Trauma: Exploring cumulative stress, fatigue and trauma in a frontline community services setting - [centacare.org.au/wp-content/up ... iousTraumaReport.pdf](http://centacare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/VicariousTraumaReport.pdf)

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