

Self Care for Health Workers

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Contents

Define stress and stressors unique to health workers

Define vicarious trauma [VT] and how it affects individuals responding to gbv

Self care: Strategies that enhance personal resilience

VT informed organisations: Strategies that enhance professional resilience.

Stressors Unique to Healthcare

Extended Hours and Irregular Shifts

- Unpredictable schedules and long hours disrupt sleep, routines, and work-life balance.

High Workloads and Emotional Labor

- Constant multitasking and the emotional intensity of patient care contribute to chronic stress.

Frequent Exposure to Trauma, Suffering, and Death

- Regularly witnessing pain, deterioration, and loss can take a significant emotional toll.

Risks of Infection and Workplace Violence

- Healthcare settings pose physical risks, from contagious diseases to aggressive behaviors.

Resource Constraints and Systemic Pressures

- Working with limited staff, equipment, or support amid administrative burdens can cause frustration and burnout.

Uncertainty in Patient Prognoses

- Not knowing how a patient will respond to treatment adds psychological pressure.

Challenging or High-Acuity Patients

- Caring for individuals with complex needs or difficult behaviors requires intense focus and patience.

Competing Demands and Role Conflicts

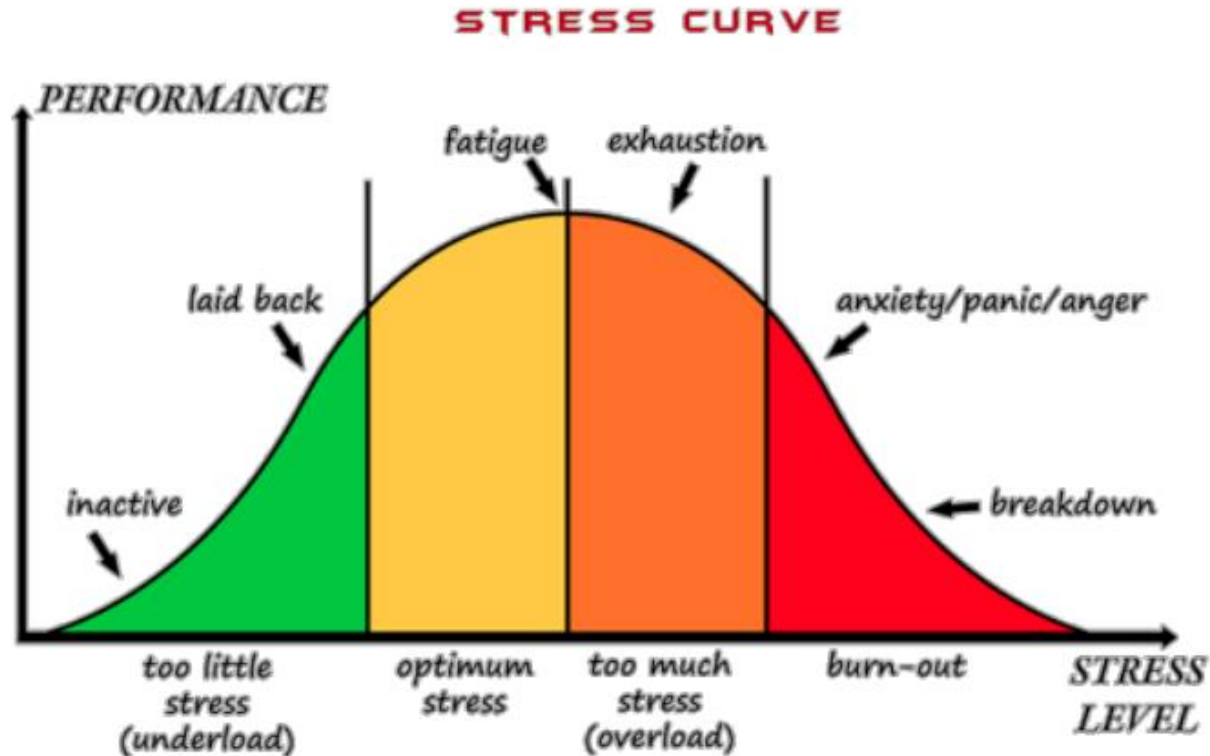
- Balancing clinical duties, documentation, and communication can feel overwhelming and fragmented.

Ethical Conflicts and Critical Decisions

- Making life-altering choices or navigating moral dilemmas under pressure can lead to emotional distress and moral injury.

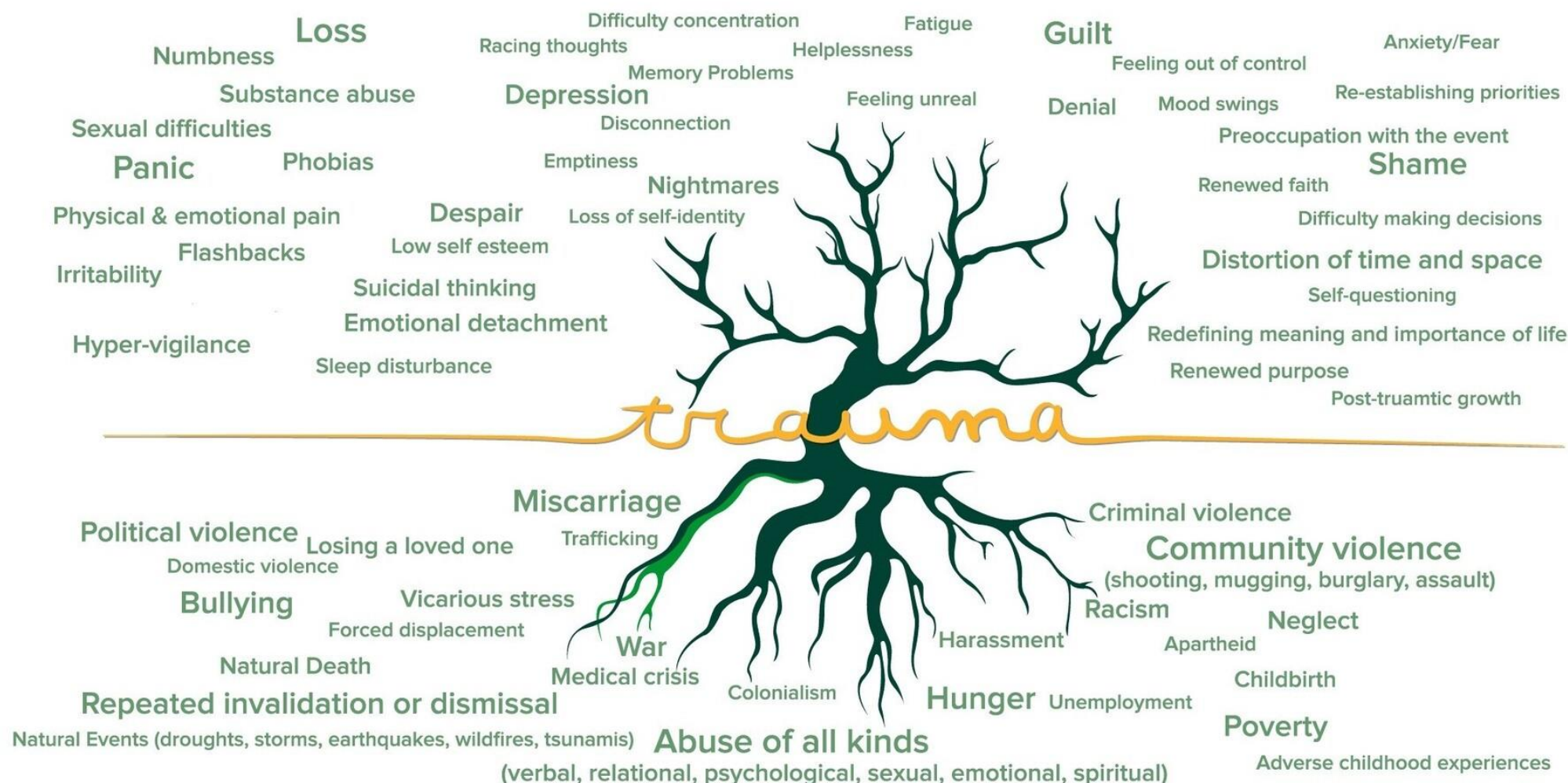


Stress



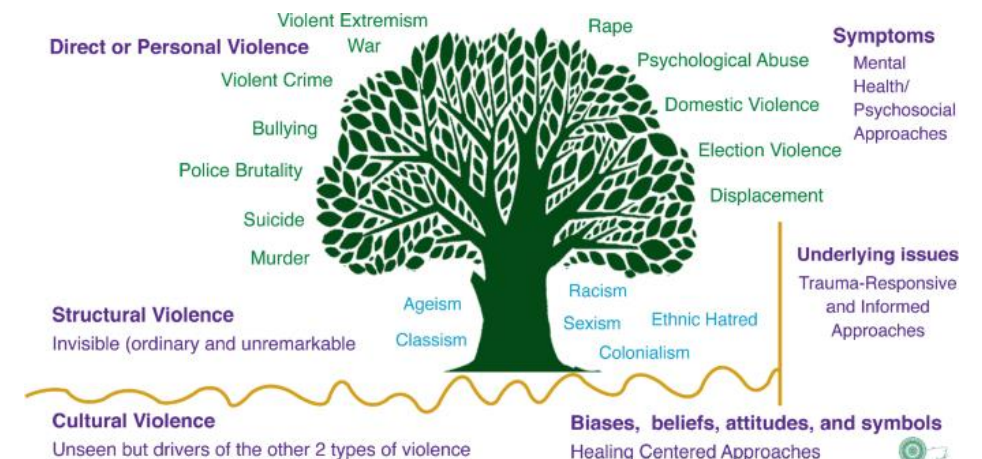
- **EUSTRESS**
 - Positive stress that motivates and enhances performance (e.g., preparing for a big presentation, year-end wrap-up)
 - positive exhilarating, challenging experiences followed by higher expectations.
- **DISTRESS**
 - Negative stress that can cause anxiety and is overwhelming.
 - disappointment, failure, threat, embarrassment and other negative experiences.
 - **Acute Stress:**
 - Short-term, immediate response
 - e.g., audit findings, client follow-up
 - **Chronic Stress:**
 - Long-term, persistent stress
 - e.g., perpetual deadlines, endless reconciliations

Trauma

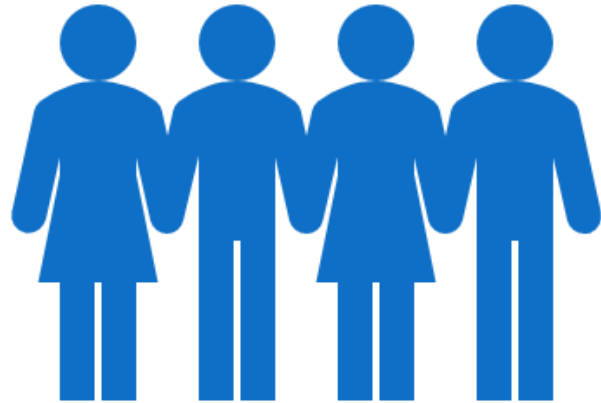


Vicarious Trauma

- Used interchangeably:
 - Compassion fatigue
 - Secondary traumatization
 - Secondary stress disorder
 - Insidious trauma
 - Empathetic stress fatigue
- “transformation of the health-care provider’s inner experiences as a result of empathetic and/ or repeated engagement with (sexual) violence survivors and their trauma material” [WHO, 2013]



Risk Factors for Vicarious Trauma



Personal Factors:

- Trauma history
- Pre-existing psychological conditions
- Younger age or limited life experience
- Social isolation, weak support network
- Personal loss in the past 12 months

Professional Factors:

- Inadequate supervision or mentorship
- High caseloads of trauma survivors
- Limited clinical or field experience
- Misalignment between worker and organization values
- Lack of professional peer support
- Poor or absent orientation/training

Impact of Vicarious Trauma: Personal

- Difficulty focusing, intrusive traumatic memories, negative thinking

Cognitive:

thoughts



- Feelings of anxiety, sadness, guilt, anger, helplessness, or emotional detachment

Emotional:



- Frequent headaches, persistent fatigue, increased heart rate, and weakened

Physical:



- Disrupted sleep, heightened irritability, social withdrawal, recurring

Behavioral:



- A sense of lost purpose, inner conflict with beliefs, and feelings of hopelessness

Spiritual:



- Social withdrawal, lack of trust, reduced emotional closeness, impatience.

Relational:



- Heightened sense of insecurity and excessive worry about potential dangers of

Psychological Safety:



Impact of Vicarious Trauma: Professional

- Avoiding tasks or becoming overly fixated on them, forgetfulness, decline in work quality, and perfectionist tendencies

Performance:



- Lack of motivation, emotional detachment, loss of morale, feeling undervalued, and reduced empathy

Morale:



- Distancing from colleagues, ineffective communication, increased workplace tension, and a belief that no

Relationships:



- Frequent tardiness, absenteeism, excessive workload, and failure to complete responsibilities,

Behaviors:



- Over-identification or avoidance of patients, bystander guilt/shame, crossing of boundaries

Boundaries:



Burnout

- A state of **emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion** caused by prolonged stress
- Common in high-demand, high-pressure jobs
- Key signs:
 - **Fatigue** and low energy
 - **Cynicism** or detachment from work
 - **Reduced performance** or sense of accomplishment
- Often develops gradually over time
- Linked to **heavy workloads, poor support, and lack of work-life balance**

SPC/HEALTH/DCS15/

Technical Paper N°5

SUSTAINABLE HEALTH SYSTEMS IN THE BLUE PACIFIC

12 – 15th August 2024, Tanoa International Hotel, Nadi, Fiji

**PACIFIC MEDICAL WORKFORCE BURNOUT STUDY
ADVANCE RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Paper presented by Odille Chang, Associate Dean Learning and Teaching, Associate Professor Psychiatry, Fiji National University, Fiji and Brigid Ryan, Program Co-Ordinator, St. Vincent's Melbourne, Australia

ARTICLE



“I should have known”. The perceptual barriers faced by mental health practitioners in recognising and responding to their own burnout symptoms

M.D. Ledingham^a, P. Standen^b, C. Skinner^c and R. Busch^a

^aSchool of Arts and Sciences, University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, Australia; ^bSchool of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia; ^cSchool of Medicine, University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, Australia

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Physical, psychological and occupational consequences of job burnout: A systematic review of prospective studies

[Denise Albieri Jodas Salvagioni](#), Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing,¹

[Francine Nesello Melanda](#), Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing,²

[Arthur Eumann Mesas](#), Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing,³

[Alberto Durán González](#), Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – review & editing,³ [Flávia Lopes Gabani](#), Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – review & editing,⁴ and [Selma Maffei de Andrade](#), Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing^{3,*}

[*Correspondence: Denise Jodas Salvagioni](#)

Resilience

- Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors.



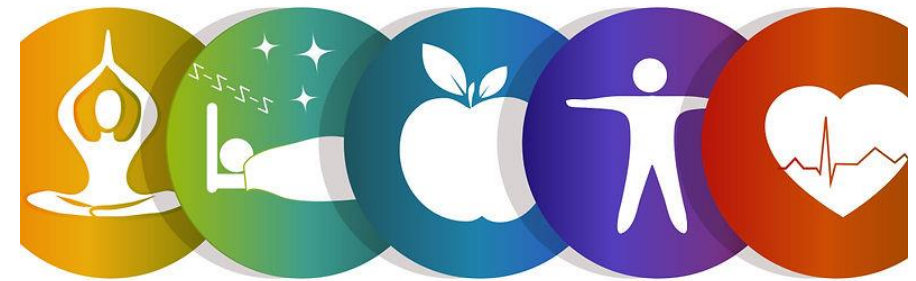
Self Care

- **Tip 1: Maintain healthy support systems**
 - Reach-out to co-workers
 - Make and maintain healthy, supportive relationships
 - Spend time with family
 - Participate in community activities



Self care

- **Tip 2: Focus on your physical health: exercise and nutrition, health checks**
 - Exercise regularly
 - At work: stretch at the desk, take short walks, get out for at least 5 min at lunch
 - Maintain a balanced, healthy diet
 - Regular health checks
 - Avoid substance use
 - Get adequate sleep



Self care

- **Tip 3: Prioritize and organize**
 - Create a balanced schedule.
 - Leave earlier in the morning.
 - Plan regular breaks.
 - Ensure that there is enough time for relaxation and leisure activities
 - Establish healthy boundaries
 - Don't over-commit yourself.
 - Make goals and reflect on your growth



Self-care

- **Tip 4: Break bad work habits**
 - Prioritize tasks
 - Recognize when you need to delegate
 - Don't try to control the uncontrollable.
 - Ensure opportunities to talk and debrief
 - Adequate clinical supervision
 - Training opportunities
 - Advocate for yourself
 - Emotional regulation: "leave it at the door exercise"



Self care

- **Tip 5: Take care of yourself**
 - Set aside time everyday for you
 - Morning tea/coffee
 - Meditate/Mindfulness
 - Exercise
 - Positive self-affirmation
 - Journal : 3 wins of the day
 - Maintain your spirituality/faith
 - Verbalize: identify and express feelings/ stress
 - Schedule create or recreational activities



Self Care Kit

- Touch:
 - soft blanket, teddy
- Taste:
 - chocolates, favourite snack
- Sight
 - Pictures of loved ones, fun times
- Hearing
 - Playlist of music that makes you feel good
- Smell
 - Scented candle, perfume, lotion



<https://foundrybc.ca/stories/self-care-toolkit/>

Self care Plan

- **1. People I Want to Stay Connected With**

- Close friends: [Insert names] - Weekly check-ins
- Family members: [Insert names] - Bi-weekly calls or visits
- Colleagues or mentors: [Insert names] - Monthly check-ins or coffee chats
- Therapist or counselor (if applicable): [Insert name] - Scheduled sessions or as needed

- **2. Self-Care Tools and Frequency**

- Exercise (e.g., walking, yoga): 3-5 times per week
- Journaling or expressive writing: Daily or as needed
- Mindfulness or meditation apps (e.g., Calm, Headspace): 10 minutes daily
- Digital detox (limiting screen time/social media): 1-2 evenings per week
- Hobbies (e.g., painting, reading, gardening): Weekly or more often
- Adequate sleep and nutrition: Daily focus

<https://preventgbvafrica.org/resources/documents/16-days-campaigns/2014/177-self-care-activity-series/file>

Self care Plan

• 3. Techniques That Help Me Feel Better

- Deep breathing and grounding exercises
- Listening to music or nature sounds
- Spending time outdoors or in nature
- Talking with a trusted person
- Practicing gratitude or positive affirmations

• 4. Signs That Things Are Getting Too Much

- Recognizing early warning signs helps prevent burnout.
- Constant fatigue or disrupted sleep
- Avoiding responsibilities or social contact
- Feeling emotionally numb or easily overwhelmed
- Increased irritability, cynicism, or hopelessness
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

• 5. Who to Talk To When It Feels Overwhelming

- Primary contact: [Friend, family member, partner - name/contact]
- Workplace support: [Supervisor, peer support, HR - name/contact]
- Professional help: Therapist, counselor, or support line
- Crisis support: [Local mental health crisis line or national hotline]



Vicarious Trauma- Informed Organization



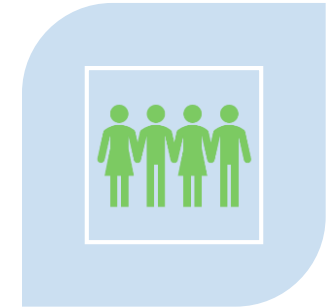
RECOGNIZES VT AS A
WORKPLACE ISSUE



PROMOTES TRAUMA-
INFORMED LEADERSHIP



ENFORCE POLICIES
THAT PRIORITIZE
STAFF WELL-BEING



ENCOURAGES STAFF
CARE AND SAFETY

Strategies for VT Informed Organisations

- **Plan for Safety Across All Levels**
Integrate emotional and physical safety planning at the individual, program, and organizational levels, including field protocols and crisis response procedures.
- **Embed Support in Program Design**
Ensure every GBV-related program includes strategies for managing emotional impact and workload, such as regular check-ins, flexible scheduling, and recovery time after intense cases.
- **Affirm Well-Being in Organizational Culture**
Develop a mission statement and policies that prioritize staff mental health, encourage self-care, and normalize conversations around stress, trauma, and burnout.
- **Provide Targeted Training**
Equip staff with tools for self-awareness, trauma-informed practice, ethical boundaries, de-escalation skills, and safety in high-risk situations.
- **Establish Peer and Professional Support Systems**
Create access to peer mentorship, team debriefings, and confidential counseling—both during projects and as part of post-engagement reintegration.
- **Maintain Clear Referral and Resource Pathways**
Offer a comprehensive referral map or contact list for both survivor and staff support services, updated regularly and accessible post-project.
- **Encourage Confidential Feedback and Early Intervention**
Set up anonymous channels for staff to report concerns and consider optional mental health screenings to support staff readiness and prevent crisis escalation.

Key Aspects of a VT- Informed Organization



Leadership & Mission: Clear vision, trauma-informed values, and supportive leadership



Management & Supervision: Respectful, inclusive, and VT-aware supervision practices



Employee Empowerment: Peer support, team cohesion, and inclusive work culture



Training & Professional Development: Ongoing training inclusive of VT awareness



Staff Health & Wellness: Institutional wellness support through policies and programs



Organizational Strategies: Staff debriefings, peer support, retreats, and team-building

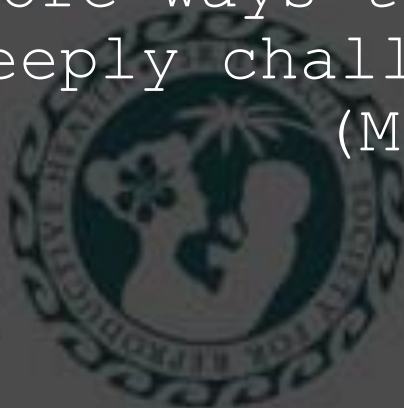


Normalize VT and STS: Acknowledge these as real issues requiring proactive support

“Clients and patients will not stop needing help and support. Disasters will continue to arise. Children will get sick; trauma will occur. Helping professionals need to continue to explore ways to remain healthy while doing this deeply challenging and rewarding work.”
(Mathieu, 2012)



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Reflection

01

How has witnessing a client's resilience impacted your personal or professional growth?

02

In what ways can your organization better support both awareness of VT and cultivation of vicarious resilience?

03

Are you aware of training or support systems in your workplace that help you process trauma exposure?

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