



RISK AND RESILIENCE 

# VICARIOUS TRAUMA

**A TOOLKIT FOR ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS**

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## WHAT IS VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

The concept of vicarious trauma originated in the **early 1990s** when researchers and clinicians began to recognise that professionals working with trauma survivors, such as therapists, social workers, and emergency responders, could experience profound emotional and psychological impacts from their work.

The term was first introduced by **McCann and Pearlman in their 1990 study**, which explored how therapists working with trauma patients could develop symptoms like those of the people they were supporting.

Vicarious trauma is interpreted as a **transformation in the helper's inner experience, resulting from empathetic engagement with traumatised clients**. This phenomenon includes changes in thinking, beliefs about the world, and one's sense of self, safety, and control.

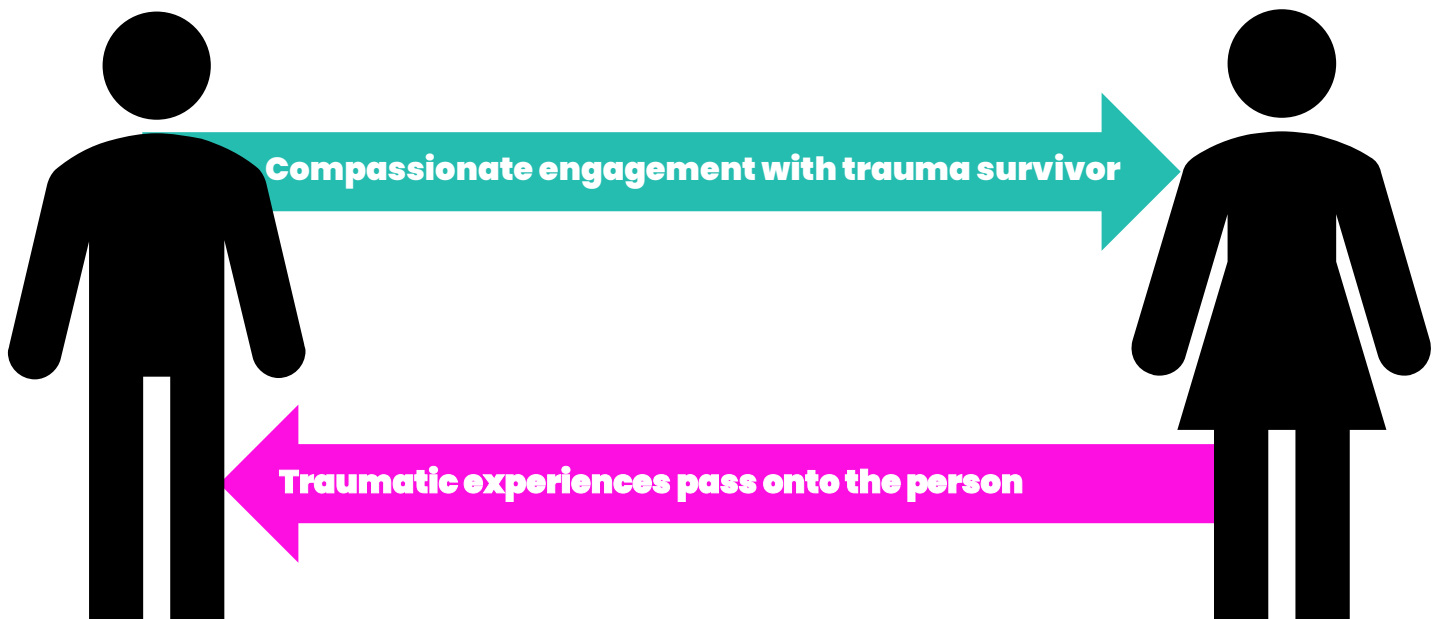
Over time, the concept has expanded to include a broad range of professionals exposed to secondary trauma, emphasising the importance of organisational support, self-care strategies, and resilience-building to mitigate its effects. **Understanding and addressing vicarious trauma has become crucial in promoting the wellbeing and effectiveness of those dedicated to supporting trauma survivors.**

## HOW DOES IT LINK IN WITH OTHER IMPACTS?

Although Vicarious Trauma can lead people to a place of Burnout, it is important we make the distinction between the two, as well as a concept known as empathy/compassion fatigue:

- **Burnout:** This is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. It can occur when you experience long-term stress in your job, or when you have worked in a physically or emotionally draining role for a long time.
- **Empathy/Compassion Fatigue:** Vicarious trauma and empathy/compassion fatigue are closely related concepts, yet they differ in their specific impacts on individuals who work with trauma survivors. Empathy/compassion fatigue is characterised by the emotional and physical exhaustion that stems from the continuous display of empathy towards others' suffering. It can lead to reduced ability to empathise, increased irritability, and a general sense of burnout. While vicarious trauma affects the helper's worldview and internal psychological state, empathy fatigue primarily impacts their emotional energy and capacity for empathy. Both conditions can be interrelated, as prolonged empathy fatigue can contribute to the development of vicarious trauma.

## HOW CAN IT OCCUR?



### Signs of Vicarious Trauma: Negative Responses

- ❑ Experiencing lingering feelings of anger, rage and sadness about the person's victimisation
- ❑ Becoming overly involved emotionally with the person
- ❑ Experiencing bystander guilt, shame, feelings of self-doubt
- ❑ Being preoccupied with thoughts of people you are supporting outside of the work situation
- ❑ Over identification with the person (**having horror and rescue fantasies**)
- ❑ Loss of hope, pessimism, cynicism
- ❑ Distancing, numbing, detachment, cutting people off, staying busy. Avoiding listening to further traumatic experiences
- ❑ Difficulty in maintaining professional boundaries with the person, such as overextending self (**trying to do more than is in the role to help the patient**)

Source: [www.bma.org.uk](http://www.bma.org.uk)

### Signs of Vicarious Trauma: Positive Responses

- ❑ Feeling inspired about a person's resilience. Seeing their own mental and emotional fortitude.
- ❑ Feeling of **Compassion Satisfaction**. This refers to the pleasure derived from work, including feeling positively about the meaningfulness of one's contribution to the work and/or to the greater good of society.
- ❑ Utilising effective responses from organisation, team, manager or colleagues
- ❑ Demonstrating effective self-compassion

Source: [ovc.ojp.gov](http://ovc.ojp.gov)

***“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”***

Remen 2006

## WHY DOES IT OCCUR?

### Amygdala Activation and the Brain's Stress Response

The amygdala, an almond-shaped cluster of nuclei located deep within the temporal lobes of the brain, plays a crucial role in the detection of threat and the initiation of the body's stress response. When an individual is exposed to vicarious trauma, the amygdala can become hyperactive.

- 1. Amygdala:** The amygdala is responsible for processing emotions, especially fear. It acts as the brain's alarm system, detecting potential threats and signalling other parts of the brain to initiate a stress response.
- 2. Hypothalamus:** Once the amygdala detects a threat, it signals the hypothalamus, which acts as a command centre, communicating with the rest of the body through the autonomic nervous system.
- 3. Autonomic Nervous System (ANS):** The ANS has two main components: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). The SNS prepares the body for a 'fight or flight' response, while the PNS helps calm the body down after the threat has passed.
- 4. Hormonal Response:** The hypothalamus also triggers the release of stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline, from the adrenal glands. These hormones prepare the body to respond to the threat.

## Survival Responses: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Friend, Flop

When faced with vicarious trauma, the brain can trigger several instinctual survival responses. Each response has its unique characteristics and serves to protect the individual from perceived danger.

1. **Fight:** This response is characterised by a readiness to confront and combat the threat. Signs include increased aggression, muscle tension, and a surge of energy. This reaction is driven by adrenaline and prepares the individual to defend themselves or others.
  - **Physiological Changes:** Increased heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenaline levels. Muscles tense, and pupils dilate.
  - **Behavioural Manifestations:** Aggressive behaviour, shouting, physical confrontation, or intense focus on resolving the issue.
  - **Purpose:** To confront and neutralise the threat.
  
2. **Flight:** The flight response involves the urge to escape or avoid the threat. Symptoms include increased heart rate, rapid breathing, and a sense of urgency to flee. This response is also mediated by adrenaline, which enhances the body's ability to move quickly and efficiently.
  - **Physiological Changes:** Rapid heart rate, sweating, and an adrenaline rush. Blood flow is directed to the legs and large muscle groups to facilitate running.
  - **Behavioural Manifestations:** Avoidance behaviours, running away, withdrawal from the situation.
  - **Purpose:** To escape from the threat and seek safety.
  
3. **Freeze:** When neither fighting nor fleeing is deemed possible or effective, the freeze response may occur. This involves a temporary state of immobility or paralysis. The individual might feel numb, detached, or unable to act. The freeze response is thought to be a result of the parasympathetic nervous system dampening the arousal to conserve energy and protect the individual.
  - **Physiological Changes:** Reduced heart rate, muscle stiffness or paralysis, feeling of numbness.
  - **Behavioural Manifestations:** Inability to move or speak, feeling stuck or trapped, dissociation.
  - **Purpose:** To avoid detection or minimize damage by remaining still.
  
4. **Friend:** Sometimes referred to as "tend and befriend," this response involves seeking social support and forming alliances to mitigate the threat. It can involve behaviours aimed at placating the source of danger or gaining help from others. This response is driven by the release of oxytocin, which promotes social bonding and calming effects.
  - **Physiological Changes:** Release of oxytocin, which promotes social bonding and reduces stress.

- **Behavioural Manifestations:** Seeking out social support, forming alliances, placating behaviours.
- **Purpose:** To gain help and support from others, mitigate the threat through social bonds.

5. **Flop:** The flop response is a collapse or submission reaction, where the individual may go limp or lose muscle control. This response is similar to playing dead and can occur when the brain perceives that there is no possible way to escape or resist the threat. It involves an overwhelming activation of the parasympathetic nervous system.

- **Physiological Changes:** Loss of muscle tone, feeling faint or dizzy, overwhelming fatigue.
- **Behavioural Manifestations:** Collapse, inability to stand or move, extreme submission.
- **Purpose:** To avoid harm by appearing non-threatening or to conserve energy.

## ARE THERE ANY INCREASED RISK FACTORS?

### Personal

- Lived experience/trauma history
- Pre-existing psychological disorder
- New into this line of work
- Isolation out of work (ineffective support systems)
- Experience of significant loss in past 12 months

### Professional

- A lack of effective line management supervision
- A lack of other professional support mechanisms: safe team meetings, reflective practice, clinical supervision (if part of role)
- High percentage of trauma survivors on caseload/who you interact with
- Ineffective training/induction process
- Isolation in work (ineffective support systems)

Sources: Bonach and Heckert, 2012; Slattery and Goodman, 2009; Bell, Kulkarni, et al, 2003; Cornille and Meyers, 1999

## HOW CAN ORGANISATIONS RESPOND?

### Effective Organisational Responses to Vicarious Trauma

Organisations that employ staff in roles where they may be exposed to vicarious trauma need to implement comprehensive strategies to support their wellbeing. Effective responses include robust line management supervision, well-defined policies and procedures, and various wellbeing opportunities. Below are some key approaches that organisations can adopt.

### Line Management Supervision

1. **Regular Supervision Sessions:** Line managers should schedule regular supervision sessions with their staff. These sessions provide a safe space for employees to discuss their experiences, challenges, and feelings related to their work. Regular check-ins can help identify early signs of vicarious trauma and offer timely support.
2. **Training for Managers:** Managers should receive training to recognise symptoms of vicarious trauma and understand appropriate interventions. This includes skills in active listening, empathy, and providing constructive feedback. Equipped with this knowledge, managers can better support their teams.
3. **Open Communication:** Establishing an open communication culture where employees feel comfortable discussing their experiences without fear of stigma or judgement is crucial. Encouraging transparency can help in addressing issues before they escalate.
4. **Utilise Debriefs:** This is especially vital for extremely distressing moments. Staff are given the opportunity to talk through the experience, share their feelings and devise appropriate next steps.

### Policies and Procedures

1. **Clear Reporting Mechanisms:** Organisations should develop and communicate clear reporting mechanisms for employees experiencing vicarious trauma. This includes confidential reporting lines and designated personnel who can provide support and resources.
2. **Trauma-Informed Policies:** Implementing trauma-informed policies ensures that the organisation's practices consider the potential impact of vicarious trauma. This can involve adjustments to workload, providing mental health days, and flexible working arrangements to accommodate employees' needs.
3. **Crisis Intervention/Safety Plans:** Having a well-defined crisis intervention/safety plan allows the organisation to respond swiftly and effectively to employees in distress. This plan should outline steps for immediate support, referral to professional services, and follow-up care.

## Wellbeing Opportunities

1. **Access to Counselling Services (sometimes known as Employee Assistance Programmes):** Providing access to counselling services is essential. Organisations can partner with external mental health professionals or offer in-house counselling to support employees dealing with vicarious trauma. Confidential and easily accessible counselling can make a significant difference.
2. **Wellbeing Programmes:** Developing comprehensive wellbeing programmes that include activities such as mindfulness training, stress management workshops, and physical fitness classes can help employees build resilience. Regular participation in such programmes can mitigate the effects of vicarious trauma.
3. **Peer Reflective Practice:** Establishing peer reflective practice groups where employees can share their experiences and coping strategies with colleagues who understand their challenges can foster a sense of community and collective support.
4. **Promoting Work-Life Balance:** Encouraging a healthy work-life balance by promoting regular breaks, ensuring reasonable workloads, and discouraging overtime can prevent burnout and reduce the risk of vicarious trauma.
5. **Recognition and Appreciation:** Recognising and appreciating the hard work and emotional labour of employees can boost morale and provide a buffer against the negative impacts of vicarious trauma. Simple acts of recognition can go a long way in maintaining a supportive work environment.

## Implementation and Evaluation

1. **Regular Training and Workshops:** Continuous training and workshops on vicarious trauma and self-care strategies should be mandatory for all staff. Keeping the information current and relevant ensures ongoing awareness and preparedness.
2. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Implementing regular feedback mechanisms allows the organisation to gauge the effectiveness of their strategies. Surveys, suggestion boxes, and one-on-one interviews can provide valuable insights into what is working and what needs improvement.
3. **Continuous Improvement:** Based on feedback, organisations should be prepared to adapt and improve their strategies for addressing vicarious trauma. This dynamic approach ensures that support measures remain effective and responsive to employees' needs.

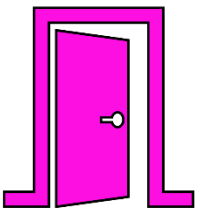
**By adopting these comprehensive strategies, organisations can create a supportive environment that recognises the challenges of vicarious trauma and actively works to mitigate its impact on staff wellbeing.**



## HOW CAN I RESPOND?

### Consider the following key areas:

- ❑ **Promote and encourage self-compassion for yourself and your colleagues**
- ❑ **Self-care activities must be individual. Find things that work for you, not others**
- ❑ **Avoid being too harsh on yourselves. This stops us developing and makes it harder to bounce back when faced with future challenges**
- ❑ **Allowing yourself to feel** – shutting positive and negative feelings out increases stress, vicarious trauma and burnout from hitting us.
- ❑ **Emotions play a significant role in our work, particularly the negative ones. How do you share positive ones?**
- ❑ **Reflective Practice** – use this and normalise this in your teams.
- ❑ **Understand your own default response to challenges. Do you mainly use Thinking, Feeling, Action or Body responses?**



### THINKING

Logical statements,  
figuring out the  
situation...

Questions to ask  
yourself:

“OK, me look at this  
situation...who can I  
talk to?”

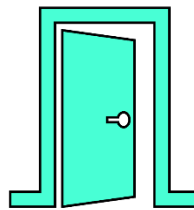


### FEELING

Feeling statements,  
exploring what you  
feel and why...

Questions to ask  
yourself:

“What am I feeling?  
What does this  
feeling tell me?”

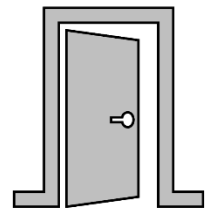


### ACTION

Doing statements,  
exploring the  
processes...

Questions to ask  
yourself:

“OK, I need to plan.  
What shall I start  
with first?”



### BODY

Recognising your  
body responses to  
trauma and  
focusing on coping  
mechanisms...

“OK, I need to use  
some grounding  
techniques.”

### Self-compassion

Traditionally, compassion has been understood in terms of concern for the suffering of others. With self-compassion, however, one is emotionally supportive toward both the self and others when hardship or human imperfection is confronted. Self-compassion is therefore key – **we cannot expect others to do so if we do not.**

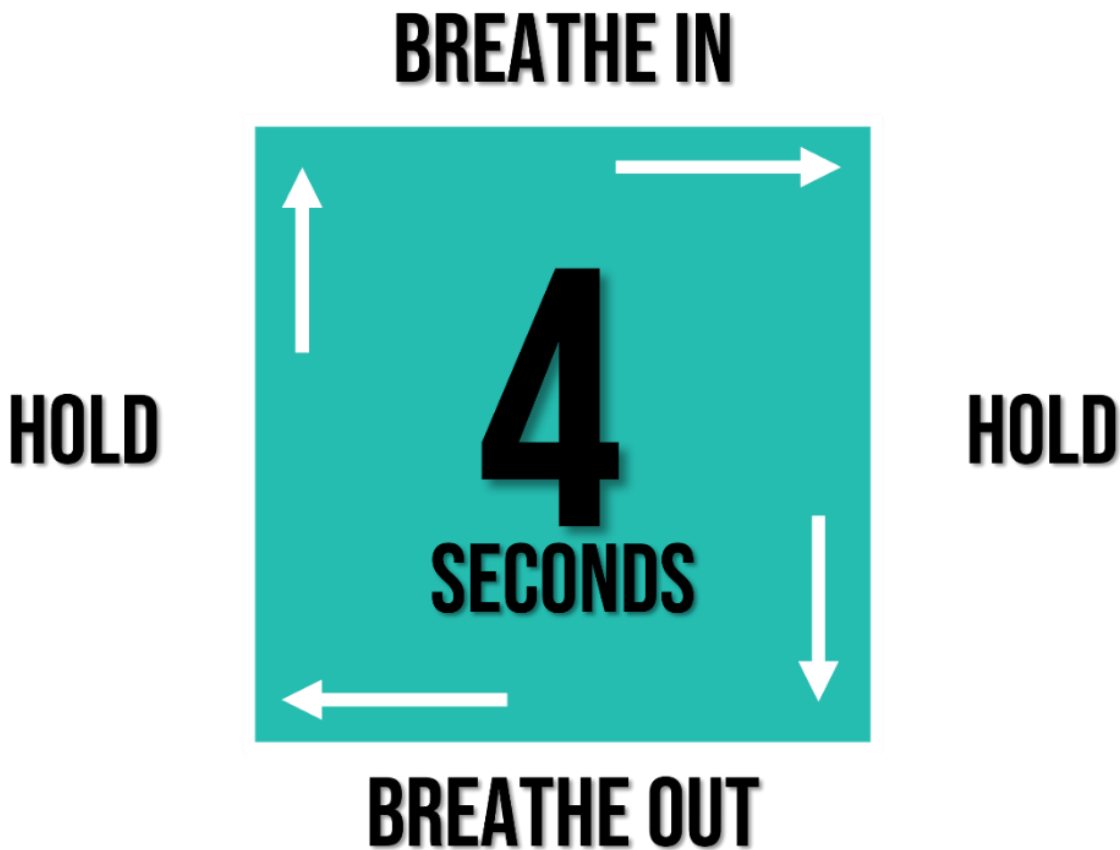
Source: Yarnell, L. M., & Neff, K. D. (2012). Self-Compassion, Interpersonal Conflict Resolutions, and Well-being

**Processes that help you in the moment and help build your self-compassion...****Begin by focusing on your breathing – Square Breathing**

**Square breathing is a powerful but simple relaxation technique that aims to return breathing to its normal rhythm after a stressful experience or when trying to be mindful/in the moment. It may help clear the mind, relax the body, and improve focus.**

**Square breathing involves four basic steps, each lasting 4 seconds:**

- 1. *breathing in***
- 2. *holding the breath***
- 3. *breathing out***
- 4. *holding the breath***



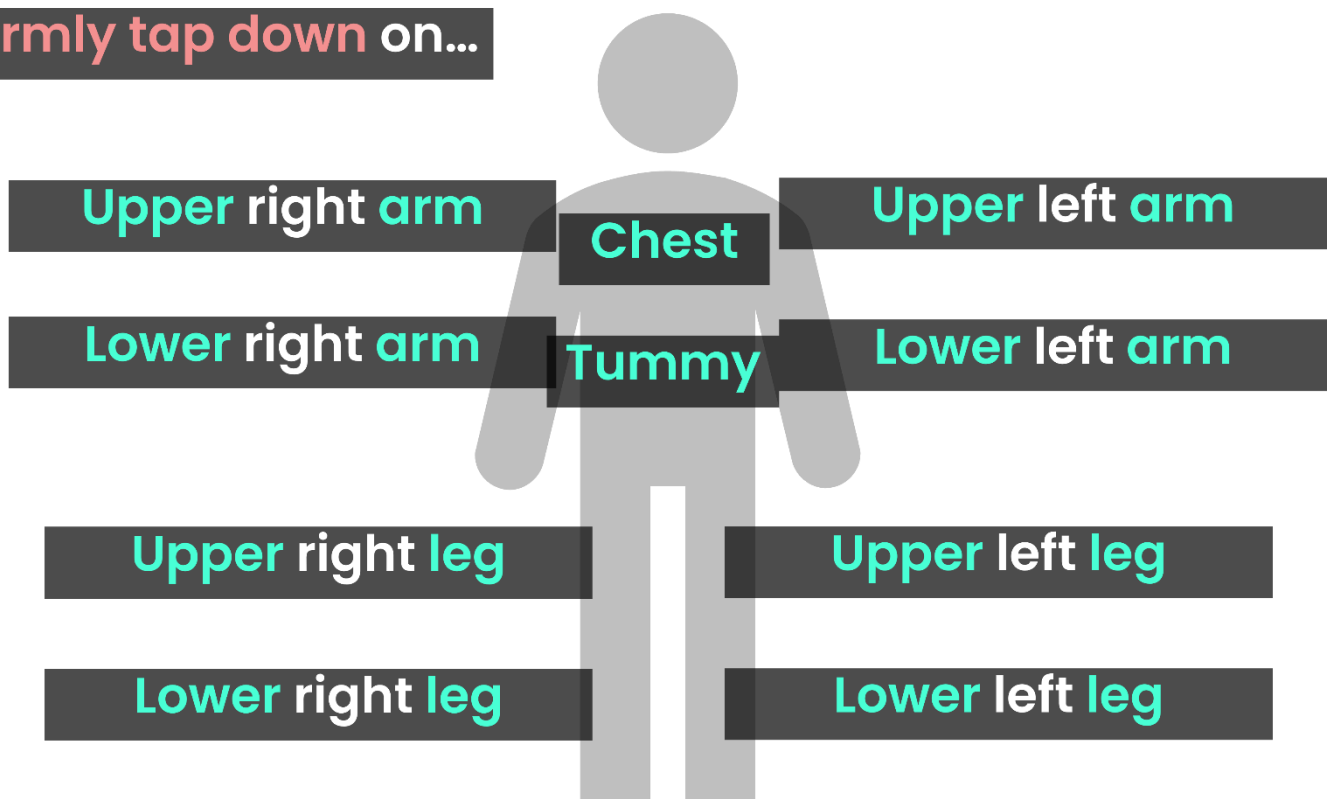
## Doughing: Physical Response

**Doughing is the act of using firm (but not aggressive or enough to cause pain) taps on your arms, legs, chest, tummy using your fist. Each site is tapped three times to get the blood flowing, to help ground you in the moment and to provide you with a physical release from holding in stress, anxiety, or other negative emotions.**

### To do it:

- **Stand up (but it can be done sat down if this is not possible)**
- **Square breathing for a moment to help ground you**
- **Clench both your hands into fists**
- **Tap down your body on each site three times (working down from your upper arms to your legs)**
- **Repeat at least twice**

**Firmly tap down on...**



**Mindfulness: Mental Focus**

**Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we are doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what is going on around us. Mindfulness is a quality that every human being already possesses, it is not something you have to conjure up, you just must learn how to access it.**

Source: <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>

**“What” Skills**

Observe	Describe	Participate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>#Just notice the experience</li> <li>#Have a ‘non-stick’ mind</li> <li>#Control your attention</li> <li>#Be alert</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>#Put words on the experience</li> <li>#Put experiences into words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>#Let yourself get involved in the experience</li> <li>#Act intuitively</li> </ul>

**“How” Skills**

Non-Judge	One Thing	Effective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>#Don’t evaluate</li> <li>#Unglue your opinions</li> <li>#Accept just as it is</li> <li>#Dont judge your judging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>#Do 1 thing at a time</li> <li>#Let go of distractions</li> <li>#Concentrate your mind</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>#Focus on what works</li> <li>#Act skilfully</li> <li>#Keep an eye on your objectives</li> </ul>

**The one-minute Mindfulness Exercise**

**Sit down, square breath and...**

<b>ONE</b>	<b>TWO</b>	<b>THREE</b>	<b>1 minute</b>	<b>FOUR</b>
Sit straight in a chair. Place your feet firmly on the floor	Place your hands in a balanced position and close your eyes/lower your gaze	Focus on your breathing. Follow each breath in and out		After 1 minute, gradually open your eyes and return to the room

## Grounding

These can help control vicarious traumatic symptoms by turning attention away from thoughts, memories, or worries, and refocusing on the present moment. One such example is below:

**Focus on your breathing and then identify...**



**5**

**Things you can see**



**4**

**Things you can touch**



**3**

**Things you can hear**



**2**

**Things you can smell**



**1**

**Thing you can taste**

**Here are some further grounding techniques:**

- ***If you have a drink (tea, coffee, water) take a sip. How does it feel? Warm? Cold? Try and hold it in your mouth for a brief period.***
- ***Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can.***
- ***Touch various objects around you: a pen, keys, your clothing, or the wall.***
- ***Dig your heels into the floor—literally “grounding” them! Notice the tension centred in your heels as you do this. Remind yourself you are connected to the ground.***
- ***Carry a grounding object in your pocket, which you can touch whenever you feel triggered. This can be anything such as a lighter, a wallet, your phone, coins, etc.***
- ***Notice your body: the weight of your body in the chair; wiggle your toes in your socks; the feel of your chair against your back...***
- ***Stretch. Roll your head around.***
- ***Clench and release your fists.***
- ***Walk slowly; notice each footstep, saying “left or “right” ... in detail to yourself.***
- ***Focus on your breathing, notice each inhale and exhale. Continue for 10 slow, deep breaths.***
- ***Eat something (grab something quick such as fruit or a biscuit), describing the flavours to yourself.***
- ***Scan the room and notice five things you see in detail.***
- ***Listen for five things that you can hear. The clock ticking, your own breathing, etc.***
- ***Focus on five things you can feel in contact with your body (i.e., your clothes, your back against the chair, your feet on the floor, your hair touching your neck, your watch on your wrist.***
- ***Do the above 3 things simultaneously.***
- ***Describe an everyday activity in great detail. For example, cooking a meal, getting ready in the morning***
- ***Count to 10 or say the alphabet. Very s..... l..... o..... w..... .l..... y..***

- **Describe your environment in detail, using all your senses – for example, “The walls are blue, there are five green chairs, there is a wooden bookshelf against the wall....” Describe objects, sounds, textures, colours, smells, shapes, numbers and temperature. You can do this anywhere,**
- **Jump up and down. Great one if you like physical activity or struggle to sit down**

A specific form of grounding can be utilised called **self-soothing**. You can build your own kit up for times of emotional distress, such as vicarious trauma.

**Things you can look at to keep you safe:**  
mindfulness books,  
relaxing youtube videos,  
going out into nature.

**Things you can touch or play with to keep you safe:** fidget toys, drawing or doodling, feeling the textures of nature.

**Things you can listen to calm you:** podcasts, music, ASMR sounds, guided meditations, mantras, listening to nature.

**Things you can smell to relax you:** aromatherapy, candles, perfumes, in nature.

**Things you can taste:** food, drink, but avoid alcohol and limit caffeine and unhealthy snacks.

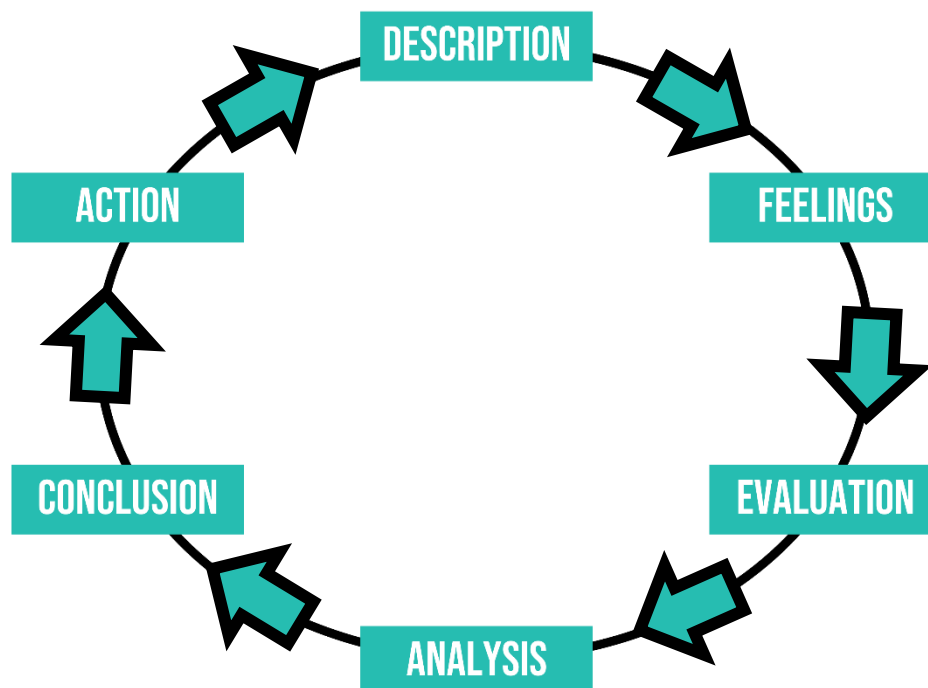
## Reflective Practice: Building our open mindset

**“Reflective Practice is the foundation of professional development; it makes meaning from experience and transforms insights into practical strategies for personal growth and organisational impact. It involves integrating activities into daily life on a routine basis which raise awareness, prompt critical analysis and aid self-management and decision-making.”**

Source: [www.cipd.co.uk](http://www.cipd.co.uk)

## The Gibbs Reflective Cycle – a useful model to use

**Professor Graham Gibbs published his Reflective Cycle in his 1988 book "Learning by Doing." It is particularly useful for helping people learn from situations that they experience regularly.**



### **Description: Use as much detail to describe the situation:**

- ***When and where did this happen?***
- ***Why were you there?***
- ***Who else was there?***
- ***What happened?***
- ***What did you do?***
- ***What did other people do?***
- ***What was the result of this situation?***

### **Feelings: What did you feel during the situation:**

- ***What did you feel before this situation took place?***
- ***What did you feel while this situation took place?***

- *What do you think other people felt during this situation?*
- *What did you feel after the situation?*
- *What do you think about the situation now?*
- *What do you think other people feel about the situation now?*

**Evaluation:** **Look objectively at the situation:**

- *What was positive/negative about this situation?*
- *What did you and other people do to contribute to the situation (either positively or negatively)?*

**Analysis:** **Extract the meaning:**

- *Why did things go well/not well?*
- *What knowledge/understanding has this given me?*

**Conclusion:** **Summarise and reflect on the experience:**

- *Do I need to learn further skills because of this?*
- *Have I implemented anything new/different because of this?*

**Action:** **Think of if this situation happened again in the future:**

- *What would I do differently?*
- *What would I do the same?*

**A.C.C.E.P.T.S. Technique: An approach to use in stressful or overwhelming moments**

- **Activities:** Engage in an activity, and this can be just about any healthy activity. Read a book, make, go for a walk, call your friend, wash the dishes. Anything that keeps you busy and keeps your mind off the negative emotion will help.
- **Contributing:** Do something kind for another person. Giving service can help you relieve emotional distress in a couple ways. An act of service is also an activity that, as mentioned above, will help get your mind off the problem at hand.
- **Comparisons:** Put your life in perspective. Is there a time when you've faced more difficult challenges than you're facing today? Use this skill to add a different perspective to what you're experiencing right now.
- **Emotions:** You have the power to invoke the opposite emotion of your current distressed feeling. If you are feeling anxious, practice meditation for 15 minutes. Adding a dose of the opposite emotion helps reduce the intensity of the negative emotion.
- **Push Away:** When you can't deal with something just yet, it's okay to push the problem out of your mind temporarily. You can push away by distracting yourself with other activities, thoughts, or mindfulness.
- **Thoughts:** Replace negative, anxious thoughts with activities that busy your mind. These distractions can help you avoid self-destructive behaviour until you're able to achieve emotion regulation.
- **Sensation:** Use your five senses to self-soothe during times of distress.



**Devise your own safety plan for Vicarious Trauma**

**Safety Plans support both you and your employer to identify and deal with triggers to feel prepared for a situation and ensure an effective and consistent approach is received. Fill in your own version below:**

**What could Vicarious Trauma look like for me?**

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**How might this come out in my behaviours or actions?**

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**What would be the biggest worry for me?**

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**What is my biggest strength at responding to Vicarious Trauma?**

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## What are my ways of coping when Vicarious Trauma hits?

Example situations that might cause it?	My warning signs ( <i>physical, mental, emotional</i> )	My safe people to talk to are...	I will do these activities...	I will expect this from the organisation/my manager...	When shall we review this?

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