

Your Guide to
Vicarious Resilience



Recognizing the Signs of Compassion Fatigue

As a helper, you regularly witness trauma. The work is meaningful, but it's also hard. Over time, being exposed to other people's pain can take a toll.

If you've experienced the signs below, know this: You are not alone, and there is a path forward.



Physical Signs

- Exhaustion, poor sleep, difficulty resting
- Hypervigilance, defensiveness
- Numbing, dissociation, forgetfulness
- Avoiding people or enjoyable activities



Emotional Signs

- Helplessness or hopelessness
- Guilt, shame, or feelings of inadequacy
- Irritability, anger, or rage



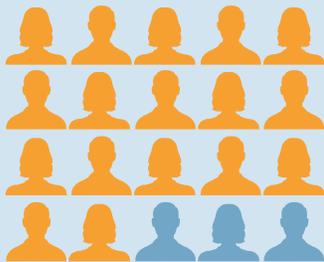
Cognitive Signs

- A mindset that you're the only one who can fix it
- Self-blame or excessive responsibility
- Rigid thinking, poor concentration or memory



Spiritual Signs

- Disconnection, apathy, cynicism
- Loss of purpose or meaning
- Over-functioning; saying yes to everything



Up to
85%
of helping professionals
will experience vicarious
trauma, compassion
fatigue, or secondary
traumatic stress.

4 Steps to Transform Vicarious Trauma Into Vicarious Resilience

1 Build Self-Awareness

Understanding how you're impacted by the work is the foundation for change. To assess the impact, ask yourself:

- Are the pressures and supports in my workplace truly meeting my needs?
- How might my own history with trauma be influencing how I respond to other people's pain?
- What cultural or societal expectations am I carrying that shape how I show up in this work?
- Am I experiencing moral distress? Am I having trouble acting in line with my values?



Moral distress occurs when your values clash with actions or systems. It often results in emotional fatigue, anger, or helplessness.

2 Learn to Turn Off the Alarm

To support others well, you must soothe your own nervous system.

- Recognize your internal alarm: Use breathwork, body scans, or mindfulness.
- Monitor your stress: Pace your day, set clear boundaries, manage energy.
- Contain clients' stories: Use writing, art, or visualization to externalize and release what you're holding. Talk to a supervisor and remember to debrief!

3 Cultivate an “Approach” Attitude

Instead of only defending against trauma, build a proactive stance that supports health.

Safety

- Care for your body with rest, movement, and nourishment.
- Create external safety (boundaries, informed decisions, safer environments).

Trust

- Rebuild trust in yourself and others after repeated exposure to harm.
- Reflect on your capacity to take thoughtful risks and remain open.

Control

- Notice where you over-control or give away power.
- Use supervision to explore reactivity and healthy influence.

Esteem

- Be kind in your self-talk.
- Make room for your needs without guilt.
- Show respect for yourself and others in alignment with your values.

4 Expand Vicarious Resilience

You can grow stronger and become more grounded, not in spite of your work, but because of it. Being exposed to other people’s pain can deepen your empathy, build resilience, and reaffirm your purpose.

Strengthening resilience involves:

- Body awareness and nervous system care
- Actively noticing client resilience and adaptation
- Trusting the healing process
- Committing to your own learning and wellness
- Practicing intentional empathy, gratitude, and self-compassion



Vicarious post-traumatic growth can lead to:

- Increased appreciation for life
- Strengthened relationships
- Enhanced self-awareness and compassion

Build Your Own Toolkit

The following resources can be used to help create a personalized plan and your vicarious trauma toolkit:

Self-Awareness Assessment

Learn about your own personal signs of vicarious trauma, so you can find ways to care for yourself and prevent burnout in the future.

Practicing Positive Self-Talk

Change how you feel and think about yourself by paying attention to your inner voice.

The Mechanics of Breathing

Use your breath to self-regulate, relax your body, and improve your felt experience.

My Own Visualization

Tap into the healing power of your imagination through this interactive exercise.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Find and release tension in your body, to release what you might be holding onto.

Self-Awareness Assessment

PURPOSE

If you're a helper working with trauma, there are going to be some impacts. This assessment will help you become aware of your own personal signs, which is key to recognizing if you need rejuvenation and for prevention.

INSTRUCTIONS

Rate each statement using the following scale:

0 = Rarely | 1 = Seldom | 2 = Occasionally | 3 = Sometimes | 4 = Often | 5 = Very Often

01	I am not happy and content with my work life.	
02	I feel drained and exhausted from giving so much.	
03	I am preoccupied with the traumatized stories I have heard.	
04	I feel apathetic about work.	
05	I feel down after working with those I help.	
06	I think too much about the traumatic experiences of a person I help.	
07	I feel trapped by my work as a caregiver.	
08	Because of my work as a caregiver, I have been on edge.	
09	Outside of work, I avoid certain situations because they remind me of the experiences of those I work with.	
10	I don't like my work anymore.	
11	I am exhausted because of my work as a caregiver.	

12	I have intrusive thoughts of stories I have heard from those I'm helping.	
13	I feel overwhelmed with the amount of work I have to do.	
14	I wonder if I make a difference through my work.	
15	I constantly see examples of people hurting other people everywhere in the world.	
16	I work too hard.	
17	I become overwhelmed when thinking about working with certain clients.	
18	I feel a compulsion to push or work harder for justice and change related to the stories I witness and work with.	
19	I feel I'm working more for money than for personal fulfillment.	
20	I have felt trapped by my work as a caregiver.	
21	I have involuntarily recalled my own traumatic experience while working with a client.	

SCORING

Burnout		Compassion Fatigue		Vicarious Trauma	
01		02		03	
04		05		06	
07		08		09	
10		11		12	
13		14		15	
16		17		18	
19		20		21	
Total		Total		Total	

0-14 = Low Risk

15-21 = Moderate Risk

22-28 = High Risk

29-35 = Extremely High Risk

Reflecting on your score, what does it mean to you personally? What does it encourage you to focus on moving forward?

While no universally applicable cutoff score can be used under all circumstances, in most cases, a higher score indicates a higher level of distress.

Practicing Positive Self-Talk

PURPOSE

How you talk to yourself has an influence on how you feel and think about yourself. By changing the way you use your inner voice or self-talk, you can start to see things positively and look for the good in every situation.

INSTRUCTIONS

Below are negative words you might use to describe yourself or that others may have used when talking about you. Circle as many words as you like that describe you. Then cross off any words you circled that you consider to be negative and use the positive words to write new messages about yourself.

Anxious	Lazy	Sad
Confident	Lonely	Smart
Gentle	Messed up	Smiley
Hardworking	Moody	Stubborn
Helpful	Popular	Tough

Write your new positive messages here:

Are there any other words you would use to describe yourself?

The Mechanics of Breathing

PURPOSE

When we focus on our breathing, we can feel our chest expanding and contracting, our diaphragm contracting and relaxing, and perhaps other muscles that are connected to our rib cage. Learning to breathe into and soften our belly helps increase strength and flexibility in our breathing and in our felt experience.

INSTRUCTIONS

Find a quiet, private location and get into a comfortable, relaxed position. Use the steps below to practice breathing.

1 Put one hand on your chest and the other on your belly. First, tune in to your breath; notice how you are breathing without worrying about changing anything. *(Pause)*

2 Now you can intentionally move into belly breathing. Put your lower hand around your belly button area, and as you inhale, gently push your belly out into your hand. Relax and allow your belly to be soft; this is not meant to be strained. *(Pause)*

3 Now relax and exhale, allowing your diaphragm to rise up naturally. Soften your back and spine at the same time, curling your lower back in slightly. *(Pause)*

4 Continue breathing in this way for a few minutes. Stop if it gets uncomfortable.

Keys to incorporate into breathing practice:

- Practice sitting upright and “opening” your chest.
- Guard against exerting too much effort.
- Inhale through the nose to promote relaxation.
- Attend to adding or allowing a pause after you exhale.
- Practice noticing the rhythm and depth of your breathing.
- As you inhale, practice finding a little more room between the ribs; as you breathe out, practice exhaling just a moment longer – this helps increase diaphragm flexibility.



Noticing when our breathing becomes shallow lets us know that we are in high alert. At that point, we can focus on our breathing and calm ourselves, allowing us more choice in our response.

My Own Visualization

PURPOSE

Visualizing a place that is meaningful to you will enhance the healing power of your imagination.

INSTRUCTIONS

Think of a place in this world that makes you feel comfortable, safe, and happy. Then ask yourself the following questions to create your own visualization:

- What would you see?
- What would you hear?
- What would you smell?
- What would you feel?
- What would you be thinking about?

Draw a picture of a place in this world that would give you a sense of peace and comfort. What would be in this place? What colors would surround you? Would there be other people in your special place?



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

PURPOSE

Intentionally tensing and releasing muscles reduces tension and relaxes the body. Focusing on specific muscle groups helps us become more aware of our bodies and the presence or absence of tension.

INSTRUCTIONS

Progressive muscle relaxation involves the tensing and releasing of muscles in the body to initiate the relaxation response. Consider doing relaxation breathing after each muscle group is tensed and released.

Short Targeted Format

1

Get into a comfortable position.

2

Clench your hands (or any tense area of the body) and hold them tightly while keeping the rest of your body relaxed.

3

Hold for 10 seconds. "One, two, three ... hold it tight ... eight, nine, ten, and release."

4

Notice how your hands feel loose and relaxed.

5

Breathe in slowly.

6

Exhale slowly, imagining the tension leaving your body.

REPEAT

Full Body Format

Using the tense and release procedure from the short format, start with the feet and move up the body, tensing and releasing major muscle groups or tense areas of the body, ending with muscles in the face.

Do each area once and take five slow breaths after each tense and release, imagining tension leaving the body on the exhale. This practice is helpful at night to encourage relaxation and sleep.