

One Page Summary: Secondary and Vicarious Trauma: A Guide for Managers and Senior Leaders

Secondary and vicarious trauma occur when individuals are exposed to the distressing experiences of others, often through their work. Managers play a pivotal role in recognising, preventing, and addressing these impacts to support staff well-being and maintain a healthy workplace.

Understanding Secondary and Vicarious Trauma

- **Secondary Trauma:** Emotional distress resulting from hearing about or witnessing the traumatic experiences of others.
- **Vicarious Trauma:** Cumulative emotional residue that alters a person's worldview and perspective over time.
- **Risk Factors:** High exposure to distressing stories, lack of support, and insufficient boundaries can heighten vulnerability.

Signs to Watch For in Staff

- **Emotional Symptoms:** Anxiety, sadness, irritability, or detachment.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Fatigue, headaches, or sleep disturbances.
- **Behavioural Changes:** Withdrawal, reduced performance, or increased absenteeism.
- **Cognitive Impact:** Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.

Key Strategies for Managers

1. Foster a Supportive Environment

- **Open Communication:** Create safe spaces for staff to share feelings and challenges.
- **Normalise Discussions:** Acknowledge the reality of secondary trauma to reduce stigma.

2. Promote Self-Care

- **Encourage Healthy Habits:** Support regular breaks, exercise, and adequate rest.
- **Provide Resources:** Offer access to counselling services and well-being programs.

3. Implement Reflective Practice

- **Facilitate Debriefing:** Host regular sessions for staff to process difficult experiences.
- **Peer Support Groups:** Encourage collaboration and shared learning among team members.

4. Set Boundaries

- **Manage Workloads:** Ensure tasks are evenly distributed to prevent overexposure.
- **Respect Personal Time:** Encourage disconnecting from work after hours.

5. Provide Training and Education

- **Recognising Trauma:** Equip staff to identify signs of secondary trauma in themselves and others.
- **Building Resilience:** Train teams on strategies to cope with stress and maintain balance.

Managers who actively address secondary and vicarious trauma create resilient teams capable of sustaining high performance while fostering a culture of care and well-being.