

Mitigating the Impact of Vicarious Trauma

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The exposure of Principals and Vice-Principals to the trauma of others is not widely recognized.

Their central role within the education system includes the care and safety of student and staff well-being, and regularly exposes Principals and Vice-Principals to the difficult, painful, and sometimes traumatic situations experienced by students, their families, staff, and – in some cases – the larger community.

The nature and frequency of exposure to traumatic scenarios may vary significantly between communities, schools, and even grade levels. There are school leaders who live and work in communities where they are exposed to continuous trauma. There are others who have less daily contact with trauma, but who may then be exposed to one or two traumatic episodes in their school community, and can find themselves struggling both emotionally and mentally with vicarious trauma.

Vicarious trauma is the accruing effect that one may develop by being exposed to the trauma of others. It is trauma that they have not personally experienced, but are indirectly exposed to through a first-hand account, repeated discussions, and even through supporting those involved following the event.

Vicarious trauma is included in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as part of the groupings of "trauma and stressor-related disorders". Principals and Vice-Principals experiencing symptoms of vicarious trauma may face:

- lingering feelings of anger, rage, and sadness about a student's victimisation
- emotional over-involvement, or over-identification with the student and/or their

family, sometimes leading to horror and rescue fantasies

- bystander guilt, shame, and/or feelings of self-doubt
- loss of hope, pessimism, and/or cynicism
- distancing, numbing, or detachment, a state of intentional 'busyness' and an avoidance of contact with the student or others wanting to discuss traumatic experiences
- difficulty in maintaining professional boundaries with the student and/or their family, and offering help beyond the parameters of their role

Vicarious trauma is also known as secondary trauma, or second-hand trauma. While vicarious trauma is not the same as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which refers to someone experiencing or witnessing trauma directly, the symptoms of PTSD and vicarious trauma can be similar.

These may include some of the above symptoms, in addition to:

- preoccupation with thoughts of students outside of the work situation
- nightmares
- social withdrawal
- negative coping skills, both personally and professionally, including substance abuse
- hyperarousal to personal safety and the safety of loved ones
- loss of work-related motivation
- distancing from spiritual beliefs
- reduced longevity in the field, a shortened career
- stress-related medical conditions

Principals and Vice-Principals who experience vicarious trauma are not weak, nor are they unskilled at their jobs. These leaders have a sympathetic engagement with their jobs, as they are deeply motivated to help others.

Vicarious Trauma vs. Compassion Fatigue vs. Burnout

When Principals and Vice-Principals are feeling challenged, or are in situations where they need to take time off from work, they often say they feel 'burned out'. While that may be true for some, for others the stories, experiences, and symptoms they share signal factors beyond burnout. It is important to identify what may be impacting the mental health of school leaders so that they and their health teams can identify the right strategies for recovery.

In researching this article, I found an informative fact sheet that describes vicarious trauma and outlines detailed symptoms along with suggested interventions. This article defines vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout, and how these three terms are complementary, yet differ from one another.

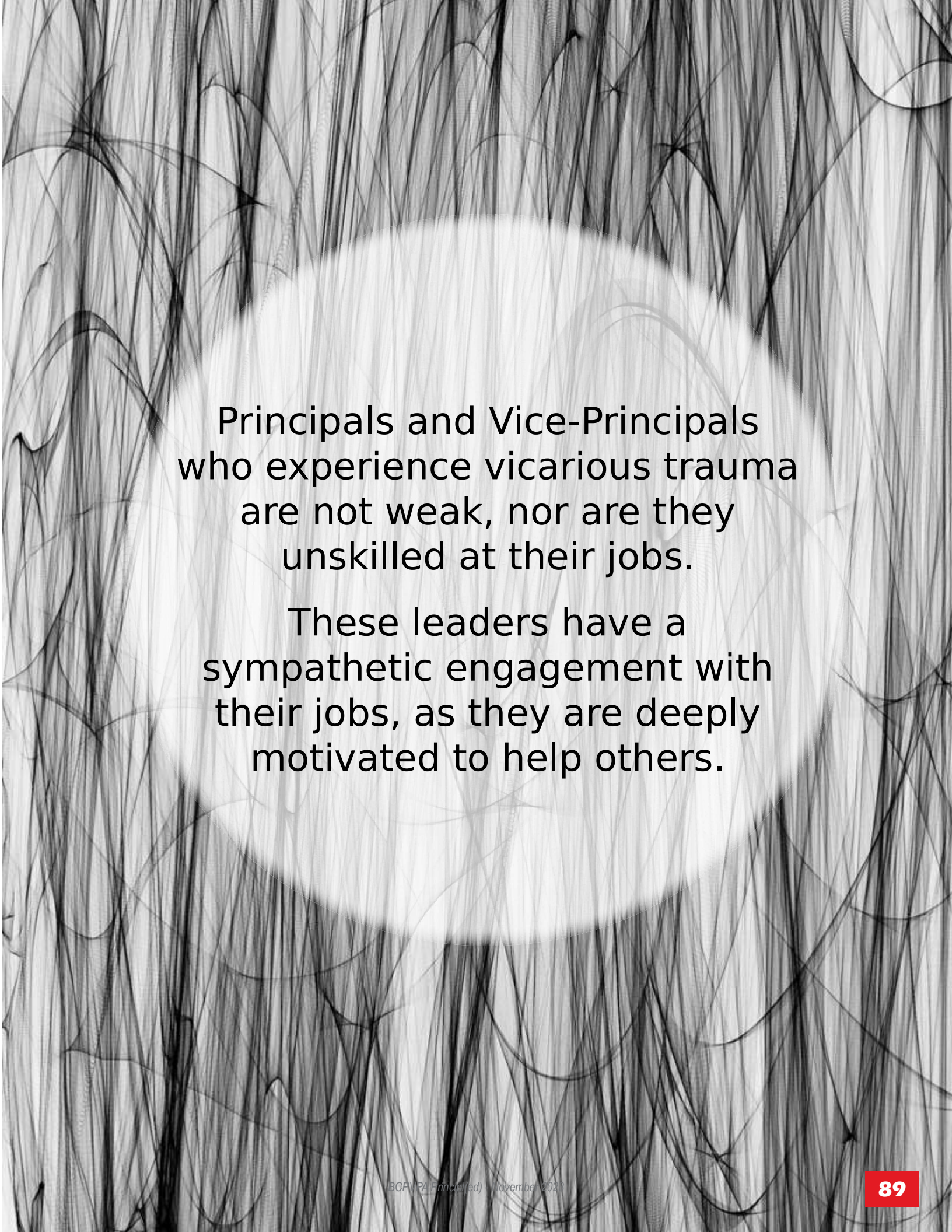
Trauma Fact Sheet

bit.ly/TraumaFactSheet



1) Vicarious trauma: The emotional residue of exposure to traumatic stories and experiences of others through work; witnessing fear, pain, loss, and terror that others have experienced.

2) Compassion fatigue: Beyond empathy, a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of compassion over time. It is often the cost of caring for others or for their emotional pain, resulting from the desire to help relieve their suffering.



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3) Burnout: A long-term stress reaction and process that is often brought about by workplace conflict, overload of responsibilities, and the perception of inequality and inadequate rewards. Burnout results in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. While burnout may lead to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted, it does not necessarily mean that our view of the world is damaged, or that we have lost the ability to feel empathy and compassion for others.

Compassion fatigue refers to the profound emotional and physical erosion that takes place when individuals are unable to refuel and regenerate, whereas vicarious trauma – a term coined by Pearlman & Saakvitne (1995) – describes a profound shift experienced by individuals when their fundamental beliefs about the world are altered and possibly damaged, by repeated exposure to traumatic information.

Compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma are much more complicated than the fatigue and overwork characterized by burnout. The two conditions often result when there is a conflict between our deepest values and the work that we are required to do, a phenomenon which is called *moral distress*.

The Canadian Medical Association states that moral distress occurs when one feels unable to take what they believe to be ethically appropriate or the right course of action, including avoiding wrongdoing or harm, because of institutionalized obstacles.

Of the three, burnout is the most easily resolved: changing jobs or taking time away from work may provide relief in a relatively short period of time to someone suffering from job-related burnout.

However, relief for vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue is elusive due to the overall impact on the nervous system and the need for appropriate

treatment. A Principal or Vice-Principal can experience both simultaneously, and conditions can be cumulative over time. The exposure of school leaders in their roles is an occupational hazard in a helping field¹, as is often cited for occupations such as first responders, health care teams, and social workers.

Are You Feeling At Risk?

If you feel you may be at risk, or are already suffering from vicarious trauma, try these coping strategies:

- Increase your self-observation, and recognise and document signs of stress and vicarious trauma. Journaling may help to explore thoughts and emotions.
- Take care of yourself emotionally, engage in relaxing and self-soothing activities, and find ways to rest and recharge.
- Look after your physical and mental well-being, and be proactive in taking care of yourself. Practice self-care: eat a healthy diet, get physical exercise, practice good hygiene, and engage in activities you enjoy outside of work.
- Be realistic about what you can do to support others, and be true to your role boundaries. Don't take on the responsibilities of your students or the well-being of their families, but supply them with tools or direct them to resources so they may support themselves.
- Take regular breaks.
- Seek social support from colleagues and family members.
- Use a buddy system; this is particularly important for new Vice-Principals. This includes using peer support and opportunities to debrief.

¹ Saakvitne & Pearlman (1996) <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-vicarious-trauma>

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- Don't always step forward for the difficult roles: regardless of how experienced and skilled you are in navigating difficult situations, you need a break at times to refuel.
- Talk to your supervisors if you feel that a change or modification in your role may reduce your exposure, and give you an opportunity for a break.
- Take time off from work if needed, particularly if you have continuous exposure to those experiencing trauma.
- Seek emotional support from families, friends, or other trusted sources.

When you first recognize that you may be struggling, make an appointment with a physician who may consider different treatment options that could include

medication to help manage certain symptoms, and/or psychotherapy.

Accessing a counsellor using evidenced-based treatments for vicarious trauma can be helpful if you are not yet experiencing symptoms, but recognize that you have high exposure. Different counselling methodologies include, but are not limited to:

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: Known as CBT, this form of therapy focuses on identifying unhelpful or problematic thinking patterns, finding ways of reframing them, and learning to respond to future situations.

Cognitive Processing Therapy: Known as CPT, this form of CBT focuses on challenging and reframing thought patterns related to traumatic experiences.

Eye Movement Desensitizing and

Reprocessing: Known as EMDR, this form of therapy uses specific eye movements to aid in retrieving, and reprocessing, memories of a traumatic experience.

Here is a great resource that was produced by the City of Toronto for The TYES (Toronto Youth Equity Strategy) Frontline Workers' Toolkit: Vicarious Trauma & Self-Care Toolkit

TYES

bit.ly/TYESToolkit



This resource was created for those working in communities who have exposure to youth trauma. It includes a full description of vicarious trauma, self-reflection exercises, and many tips and practices to help support you in your work and exposure to trauma, with an emphasis on applying self-care to limit the impact.

I invite you to take 10 minutes to scan the resource and see what it offers.

Share it with your staff who may also be exposed to trauma.

Finally, here is a quick article to reference, with relevant points on how as a supervisor or co-worker (or even family member), you can support a colleague who is exposed to vicarious trauma.

OVC

bit.ly/OVC_WhatIsVT



Continuing to Fulfill Your Purpose Safely

As Principals and Vice-Principals, you are driven by your passion and purpose, and love your role. You come to work to make a difference in the lives of students and those who support them. In today's society, this can mean that, at times, you will be exposed to traumatic events and losses that can take their toll. The key is to be aware of the risks, and continue to regularly assess your well-being. The resources in this article offer practical self-care tools to lessen the impact of trauma at work.

The well-being of your students matters, *but so does yours*. Find ways to stop, reflect, unpack, and replenish your energies – either on your own, or with your team – to continually reinforce your well-being.

References and Resources

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