

THE BEHAVIOUR INSTITUTE

Diploma in Trauma-Informed Psychotherapy

UNIT 6 • CORE READING 1 OF 6

01

What Is Vicarious Trauma?

When someone else's trauma begins to change how you see the world

What This Document Covers

This document introduces vicarious trauma — what it actually is, where the concept comes from, and why sustained exposure to other people's traumatic material can genuinely change a practitioner's own inner world, not merely tire them out.

Where the Concept Comes From

Vicarious trauma was formally identified and named by researchers Lisa McCann and Laurie Pearlman in the early 1990s, working specifically with therapists treating trauma survivors. Their central finding was significant: practitioners who worked closely and repeatedly with traumatic material showed measurable, lasting changes to their own beliefs about safety, trust, and the world — changes that closely echoed patterns seen in trauma survivors themselves, despite the practitioners never having directly experienced the traumatic events being described to them.

The Core Mechanism

Vicarious trauma is understood to develop through sustained, empathic engagement with clients' traumatic material — the very quality that makes a practitioner genuinely effective at trauma work is also, without adequate protection and support, precisely what makes them vulnerable to vicarious trauma. This is a genuinely important point: vicarious trauma is not a sign of insufficient empathy or professional inadequacy. If anything, it tends to affect the most genuinely empathic, engaged practitioners more than those who maintain greater emotional distance from their clients' material.

Over time, repeated exposure to accounts of cruelty, danger, and human suffering can genuinely shift a practitioner's own worldview — their sense of how safe the world generally is, how trustworthy other people generally are, and their own sense of control over their environment. This is not simply an emotional reaction to a difficult day. It represents a genuine, cumulative shift in core beliefs, closely paralleling the negative alterations in cognition covered in Unit 3's material on PTSD itself.

Pause and Consider

If you already work with clients, or spend time regularly with people who have experienced trauma, have you noticed any shift in your own general beliefs about safety or trust in the world since beginning that work? If you haven't yet, what do you imagine that shift might feel like, based on what you now understand about how vicarious trauma develops?

Vicarious Trauma Is Not the Same as Being Traumatised

It is worth being precise here, in keeping with this course's consistent emphasis on accurate terminology. Vicarious trauma does not mean a practitioner has developed PTSD, and it should not be equated with the direct trauma experienced by clients themselves. It refers specifically to the cumulative shift in worldview and belief that can develop through sustained empathic engagement with others' traumatic material — a real, genuine phenomenon, but a distinct one from directly experiencing trauma oneself.

Why This Matters for Every Practitioner in This Course

This is not a document aimed only at practitioners already showing significant symptoms. Vicarious trauma develops cumulatively and often gradually, frequently outside a practitioner's own immediate awareness — precisely why Document 2's coverage of warning signs matters so much. Understanding the mechanism now, before symptoms have developed significantly, gives you a genuine advantage: the ability to notice early shifts, and to apply the protective strategies covered later in this unit, before vicarious trauma has accumulated into something considerably harder to address.

A Genuinely Common Experience, Not a Rare One

Research consistently finds vicarious trauma to be widespread among practitioners who work regularly with trauma survivors, not a rare or unusual occurrence confined to a vulnerable few. This is worth stating plainly: if you go on to do sustained trauma work, some degree of vicarious trauma is a genuinely normal, expected consequence of that work, not a sign that something has gone uniquely wrong for you specifically. What varies considerably between practitioners is not whether vicarious trauma occurs at all, but how well it is recognised, managed, and actively worked with over time.

What's Next

The next document turns directly to the practical question this one has been building toward: what vicarious trauma actually looks like in practice, and how to recognise its warning signs in yourself.

A Few Things to Take With You

- Vicarious trauma was formally identified by McCann and Pearlman, describing lasting changes to a practitioner's own worldview through sustained engagement with clients' traumatic material
- It develops precisely through the genuine empathy that makes a practitioner effective at trauma work, not through insufficient professionalism
- It represents a real shift in core beliefs about safety and trust, not simply emotional tiredness
- Vicarious trauma is distinct from directly experiencing trauma or developing PTSD oneself
- It is a widespread, expected consequence of sustained trauma work, not a rare or unusual occurrence

Before You Move On

- Why do you think vicarious trauma tends to affect more genuinely empathic practitioners more significantly, rather than less?
- What does it mean for you personally to understand vicarious trauma as a normal, expected consequence of this work, rather than a personal failing?
- How might understanding this mechanism now change how you approach your own trauma work going forward?