

Vicarious Trauma: A Primer for Legal Aid Leaders

Why This Matters

Talking about vicarious trauma in legal aid work means speaking directly to the lived experience of people who do this work day in and day out. This isn't a "soft" topic — it's core to sustainable leadership. Please approach this material with care for yourself and awareness of others.

The stakes are well-documented in the legal profession specifically:

- Vicarious trauma rates among U.S. attorneys are estimated to be **almost five times higher** than for other helping professions.
- In a study comparing attorneys, mental health providers, and social workers, **lawyers experienced the most frequent and severe symptoms** of secondary trauma.
- Attorneys show significantly higher levels of PTSD, depression, secondary traumatic stress, and functional impairment compared with their administrative support staff — driven by longer hours, high caseloads, and more direct contact with traumatized clients.

Source: Pace Law Review

What Is Vicarious Trauma?

Also known as compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, or secondary stress reaction. This refers to a helping professional developing **their own trauma symptoms** as a result of continuously working with traumatized people.

It's not a personal failing or a sign someone is unsuited to the work — it's a predictable occupational response to sustained exposure to others' trauma.

Where It Comes From

Sources of trauma exposure for legal aid staff include:

- Client interviews
- Evidence, witnesses, testimony
- Current events
- Living in/under oppression as an identified member of a marginalized community
- Secondary stress response from media, news, and apps

Source: Psychology Today and the National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Recognizing the Signs

Symptoms of vicarious trauma include:

Feeling numb	Sleep disturbances
Oversized reactions	Hypervigilance
Fatigue/exhaustion	Self-doubt
Negative coping	Anxiety/fear
Irritability	Conflict
No boundaries	Isolation/withdrawal
Panic symptoms	Aches/pains
Disruption in beliefs	Morbid preoccupation
Appetite changes	Substance abuse

Source: NIH

A reflection prompt worth sitting with: How do you know when you're approaching or struggling with vicarious trauma? How many times per week do you actually engage in self-care practices — not in theory, but in practice?
