



Vicarious Trauma with Students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute

University students from Massachusetts' Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) were recently hosted by ESF to undertake a study into vicarious trauma amongst Victorian emergency service workers who are in support roles.

They sought to:

1. Understand how vicarious trauma (VT) impacts support staff working in Victoria's Emergency Management sector,
2. Understand how it's being addressed in the sector with an environmental scan, and,
3. Understand leading practice

After wide consultation they defined vicarious trauma as, 'a trauma-based psychological response onset by individual or cumulative indirect exposure to other people's traumatic experiences'.

Through 21 qualitative interviews with individuals in support roles, wellbeing and general managers, and subject matter experts, they gathered an abundance of evidence and lived experience that had never been compiled before in the sector. This environmental scan enabled them to paint a picture of their findings, and revealed that the range of support staff roles at potential risk of vicarious trauma is much larger than expected (such as dispatchers, human resources staff, communication staff, counsellors, interpreters), that support staff feel like they don't deserve the same support as frontline workers, that some agencies are taking steps to

address vicarious trauma (awareness, recruitment, education for support staff, training for managers), and that barriers to seeking support for vicarious trauma include stigma, lack of awareness and training for managers.

Every individual the students spoke with said they have experienced vicarious trauma in some way.

Through their findings, the team were able to make several recommendations for the sector to address the issue of vicarious trauma . They are as follows:

- Provide honest and transparent recruitment that paints a true picture of the potential exposure to vicarious trauma that might be experienced in a role.
- Raise awareness that support staff are as eligible for mental health support as frontline workers.
- Educate managers on vicarious trauma, so they can understand how vicarious trauma has the potential to affect them, as well as their employees.
- Have a forum to share what agencies are doing to mitigate vicarious trauma risk.
- A mental health continuum could be tailored and applied to support roles at risk of vicarious trauma.

In sum, the students found that the impact of vicarious trauma amongst support staff in Victoria's emergency management sector is profound and deeply significant. Support staff are exposed indirectly to potentially traumatic events at work in the form of hearing, reading, or watching stories and events that occur on the frontline.

Their research found that whilst there are some good things happening in isolation, there is plenty of room for improvement throughout the sector regarding vicarious trauma risk mitigation.

The report and webinar presenting the findings are available [here](#), and a podcast speaking with five support staff with different perspectives on vicarious trauma [here](#).

RESPONSES

One of the key messages from the VT presentation was the pivotal role managers and leaders can play in how support workers respond to potentially traumatic events (PTEs) and their subsequent risk of developing vicarious trauma (VT). Managers' behaviours directly influence workplace culture, shaping how employees understand, respond to, and internalise the stigma associated with PTEs and trauma. This underscores the critical need for ongoing training and targeted mental health literacy education for managers.

Adrian de Boers, Principal Psychological Education, Fire Rescue Victoria

My key takeaway was the need to education emergency service workers on the very real risk of vicarious trauma at the start of their careers. We need to normalise this conversation when we recruit and onboard staff and be open about the risks and preventative strategies, as well as the tools for recovery.

Anne Marie, Wellbeing Advisor, Triple Zero Victoria

Refreshing to see vicarious trauma in the spotlight – well done to ESF and the WPI students on an informative presentation.

Andrea Moffat, Senior Client Manager, Gallagher Bassett

See the report, webinar, and podcast