

Feature

When the helpers need help

Carers exposed to tragedy need protection, writes **Lindy Alexander.**

Jessica Feldman* can't quite remember when she realised the stress of her job as a social worker, where she supported failed asylum seekers and victims of sex trafficking, was taking its toll on her life. Feldman listened to stories from her clients of gang rapes, beheadings, whippings, brothel enslavement and child abuse.

"After six or seven years, it just seemed normal," she says. "It's part of what everyone you're working with experiences." Feldman didn't register that her heightened anxiety, together with the loss of ability to focus on her own self and needs, were indicators something was not quite right. "It's not until you tell other people outside the industry and see how shocked they are that you realise it's not normal at all," she says. What Feldman was experiencing is known as "vicarious trauma".

Vicarious trauma is a stress reaction that can occur when people are exposed to traumatic information, often through listening to the stories of those they are working with. There are multiple signs of vicarious trauma, including being unable to switch off, withdrawn behaviour, disturbed sleep, increased absenteeism from work without a specific explanation, or feeling hopeless and overwhelmed by clients' needs.

People working in caring



Stress reaction: Vicarious trauma is not just part of the job, CatholicCare's Romaine Moss says.

professions such as social work tend to be giving, empathic people, says Romaine Moss, a manager with CatholicCare in Sydney's Broken Bay diocese.

"While they might not think that they are entitled to feel distress in the same way as their clients, they are not generally disengaged onlookers," she says. "There is a very real issue in how these workers protect themselves from constant exposure to tragic stories, and the behaviours that result from a failure to recognise and address the impact of what they have 'endured' vicariously."

Moss is leading one of Australia's first comprehensive studies on the impact of vicarious trauma on residential care workers. It is research that is needed in an area

where the focus tends to be on those in frontline occupations such as paramedics, police and firefighters. Moss says indirect or secondary trauma experienced by those in helping professions tends to be thought of as an occupational hazard. This is something she wants to challenge with her research. "The common assumption is that if this is the field in which you want to work then any impact is just part of the job," she says. "And that's just not healthy."

Organisations play a major role in helping their employees achieve a healthy work-life balance, says counsellor and researcher Sarah Wayland.

"It's important to acknowledge that vicarious trauma is a reality and a very possible consequence

for people working in high-stress environments where real-life complexities occur," she says.

"Opportunities need to be provided for safe debriefing," she says. "This is where people can speak openly about the impact of their work without fear of being judged."

Knowledge of the signs may have helped Feldman, who is still grappling with the remnants of vicarious trauma and has decided to pursue a different career. "I carry these stories with me everywhere," she says. "I won't ever forget them, or the people who put their trust in me to hear them in an attempt to heal themselves."

Lifeline: 13 1114

*Name has been changed