

VICARIOUS TRAUMATISATION

Recognising Vicarious Traumatization
and what to do about it

Training created for Helpers by Lisa Nel and Mark Stancombe

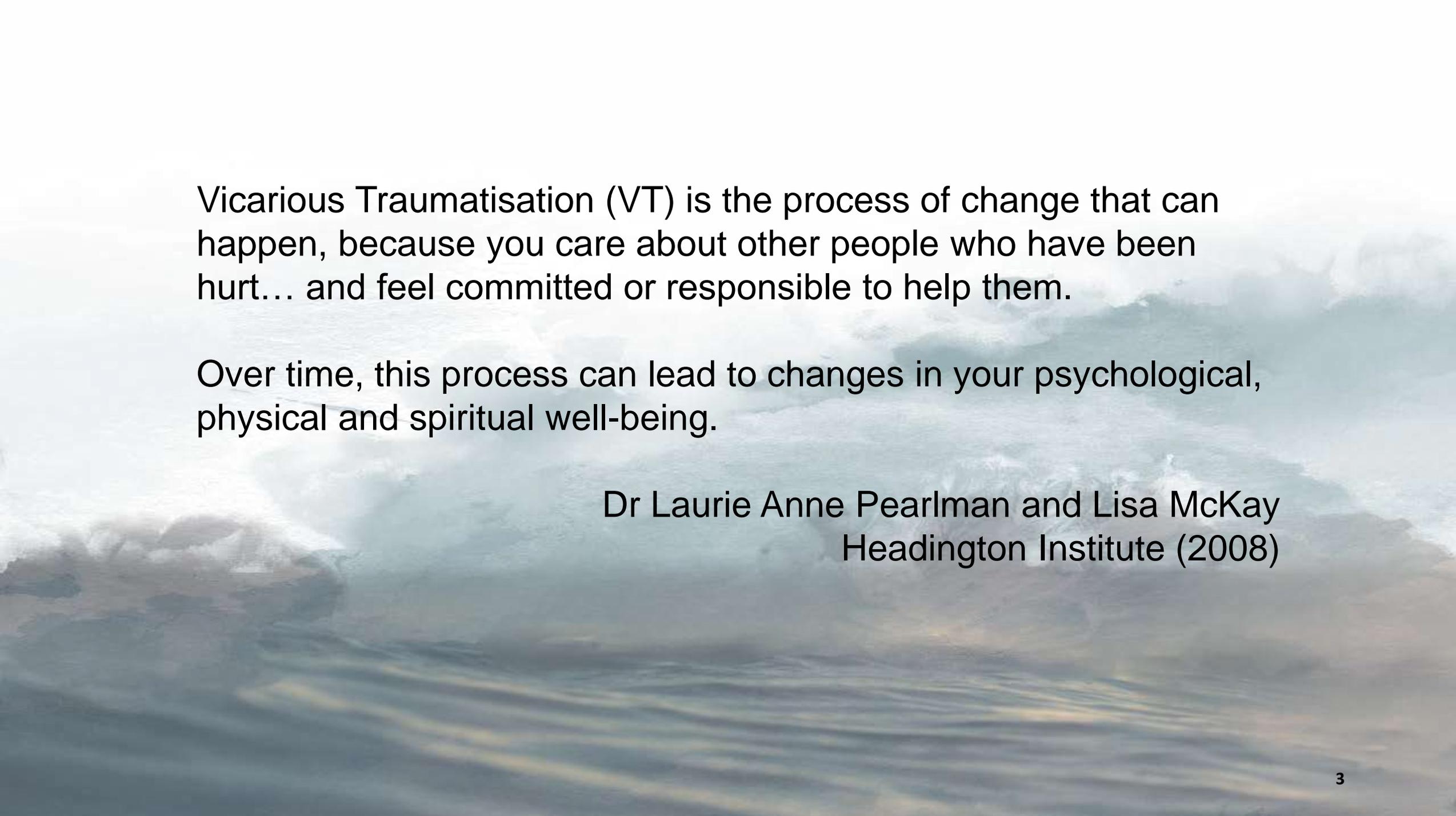
Agenda

Understanding Vicarious Traumatization (VT)

- Why this matters
- What VT is *and isn't*
- Significance of Empathy
- Signs of VT & Risk Factors

Re-framing Self-Care

- Obstacles to Self-Care
Drivers & other factors...
- 4 Cornerstones of Resilience – The ABCC's
- 3 Key Elements of Self-Care



Vicarious Traumatization (VT) is the process of change that can happen, because you care about other people who have been hurt... and feel committed or responsible to help them.

Over time, this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical and spiritual well-being.

Dr Laurie Anne Pearlman and Lisa McKay
Headington Institute (2008)

Why does this matter?

Whatever your role, we will call everyone 'Helpers'

- **Helpers matter as much as the people they help**
- **For Helpers, self-care is often bottom of the 'To Do' list**
- **Helping can take a heavy toll** and lead to burnout and VT
- Understanding the warning signs of VT, supports proactive **resilience building, de-shaming and knowing what is needed to heal & recover**
- **VT awareness, support and conscious self-care are a *Win* for Helpers, *Win* for the people they help and *Win* for helping organisations**



What VT is and isn't

What's the difference between VT and other kinds of impact that we hear about, like **compassion fatigue**, **secondary trauma** and **burnout**?

There is some overlap between them all...

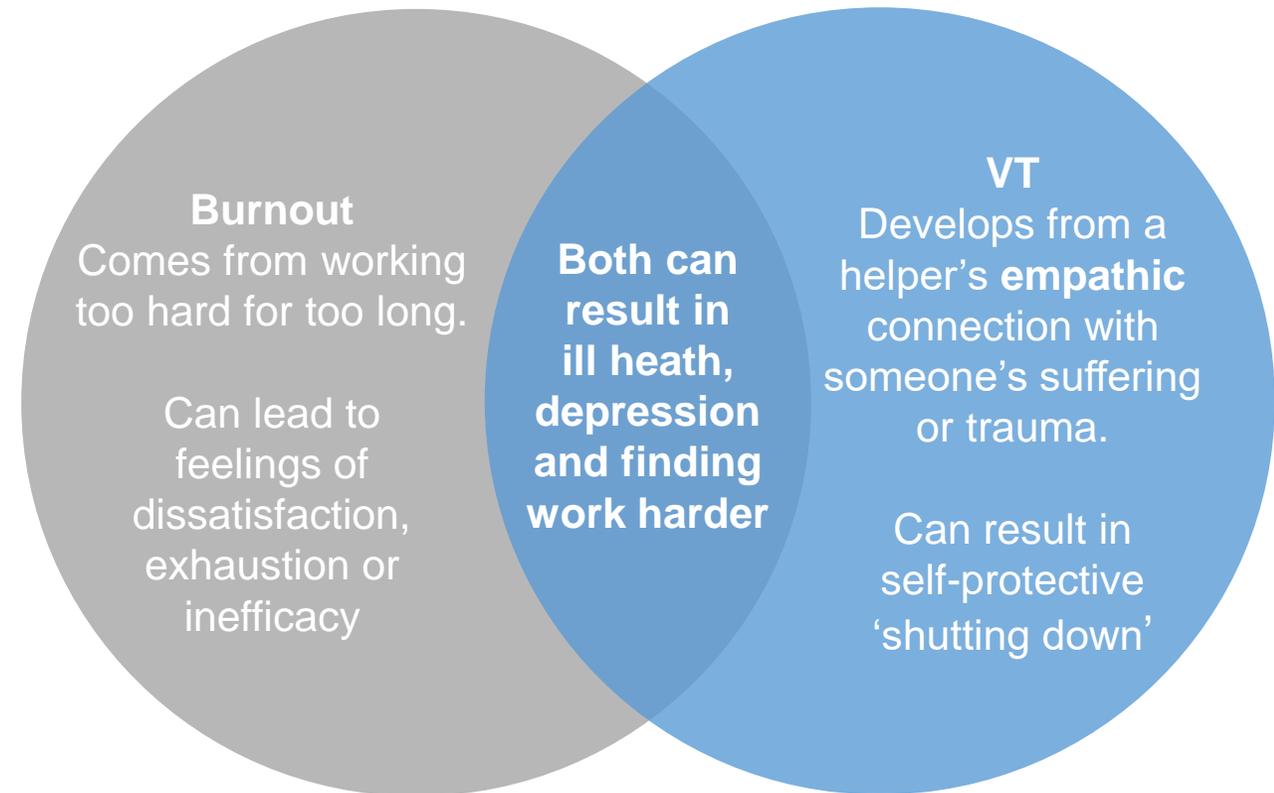
- VT typically develops over time, whereas secondary trauma arises from one-off events
- Compassion fatigue is another term used for VT
- **Burnout** can have many of the same symptoms as VT – but has nothing at all to do with *empathy*...



The difference between Burnout and VT

VT and **burnout** often go together because helpers can also be physically and mentally exhausted.

The good news is that what helps build resilience to developing **VT** is also good for preventing burnout!



The significance of empathy

Typically, people who help others are naturally empathic

Being empathic means attuning to and imagining what is going on for another person... both in their thoughts and feelings

If this is distress... it's as if 'we feel their pain'
It also means we can feel another's joy!

But what exactly IS empathy?



Mirror neurons

‘Mirror Neurons’ in a Helper’s brain are what enable an empathic connection to someone who is suffering, actually simulating some of the same physiological processes in the Helper as in the person who is suffering

It is this **physiological resonance** with someone who is suffering which can result in the helper experiencing **VT**

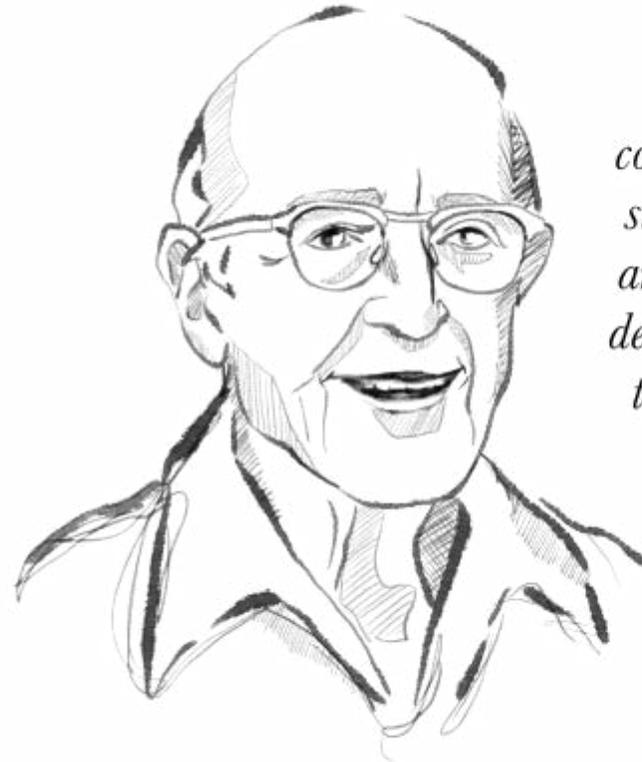


The neurological basis of empathy

- Mirror Neurons work with other parts of the brain to not only imitate but simulate what another person is feeling: e.g. *you see someone eating a 'Snicker' and think about eating one but feel hungry too*
- *This change in bodily state (feeling hungry) comes back up through our body into the pre-frontal region of our brain where what we call 'interoception' occurs...*
- Through 'interoception' you attribute what you are feeling inside you - to what you imagine is going-on inside them...
- You resonate with what you see/hear – feel hungry as you imagine the other person is hungry
- This is what we believe is the neurological basis of empathy: how we 'feel another person's feelings', understand what is going-on inside their mental world and subjective experience
- Remember: Empathic connection can be joyous as well as traumatic!

Empathy matters!

The empathic connection felt by a Helper towards another is one of the most powerful elements of the comfort, support and healing felt by the person they are helping



“The gentle and sensitive companionship of an empathic stance... provides illumination and healing. In such situations deep understanding is, I believe, the most precious gift one can give to another.”

Carl Rogers

Implications

Since empathy cannot be 'switched off' and the empathic connection of the Helper is such an important quality in what we bring to the people we support... to protect ourselves and to keep doing what we do, Helpers need to be able to:

- **Recognise the signs of VT**

and

- **Build in the support and self-care which are known to strengthen a Helper's well-being and resilience**

Signs of VT

Vicarious Traumatization can be indicated by...

- Feeling you are no longer any good at your job
- Feeling a dark despair, a lack of hope or meaning in what you are doing and in life
- Feeling increasingly disconnected and isolating yourself from others
- Feeling a lack of motivation for everyday life and self-care



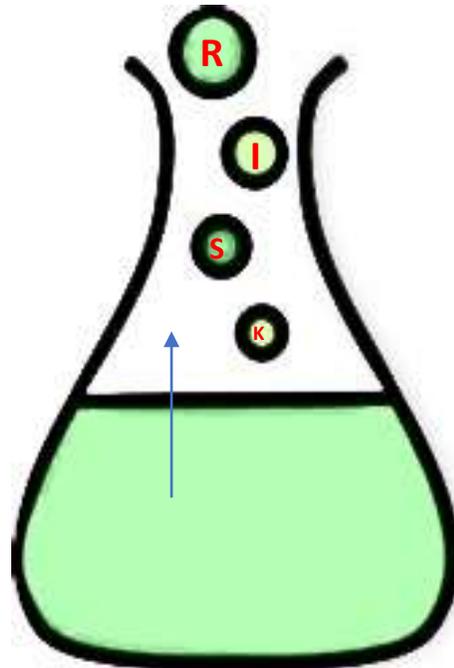
Or by...

- Having intrusive thoughts or dreams
- Feeling obsessed by the person you are helping
- ... or desperately wanting to avoid them
- Feeling overly anxious about your own loved ones



What increases the **risk** of VT?

- **Unbalanced workload**
- **Inexperience or lack of training**
- **Over-identification with patient**
- **Lack of support** at work/home
- **Feeling ineffective** at work



- **Feeling unsafe** with people you help
- **Feeling separate / without value**
- **Un-aware of own feelings/ needs**
- **Neglecting everyday self-care**
- **Not releasing our stress**

Re-framing Self-care

Helpers are typically good at reaching out to others, but last on our own 'To Do' list!

To stay well and do the job we do, self-care needs to be seen as essential – built in!



No-one expects a marathon runner to turn up without training every day!



Overcoming Obstacles to Self-care

Identifying Obstacles to Self-care

We all know that self-care is a good thing!

So why do we find it so hard to do?

What keeps us bottom of our own 'To do' list?

What part do my *Drivers* play in this?

How do they stop me looking after myself better...

... at work?

... outside of work?

What 'permissions' could I practise to help counteract my *Drivers* and take better care of myself?

The role of Drivers

Awareness (ABCCs)

Our *Drivers* originate in childhood

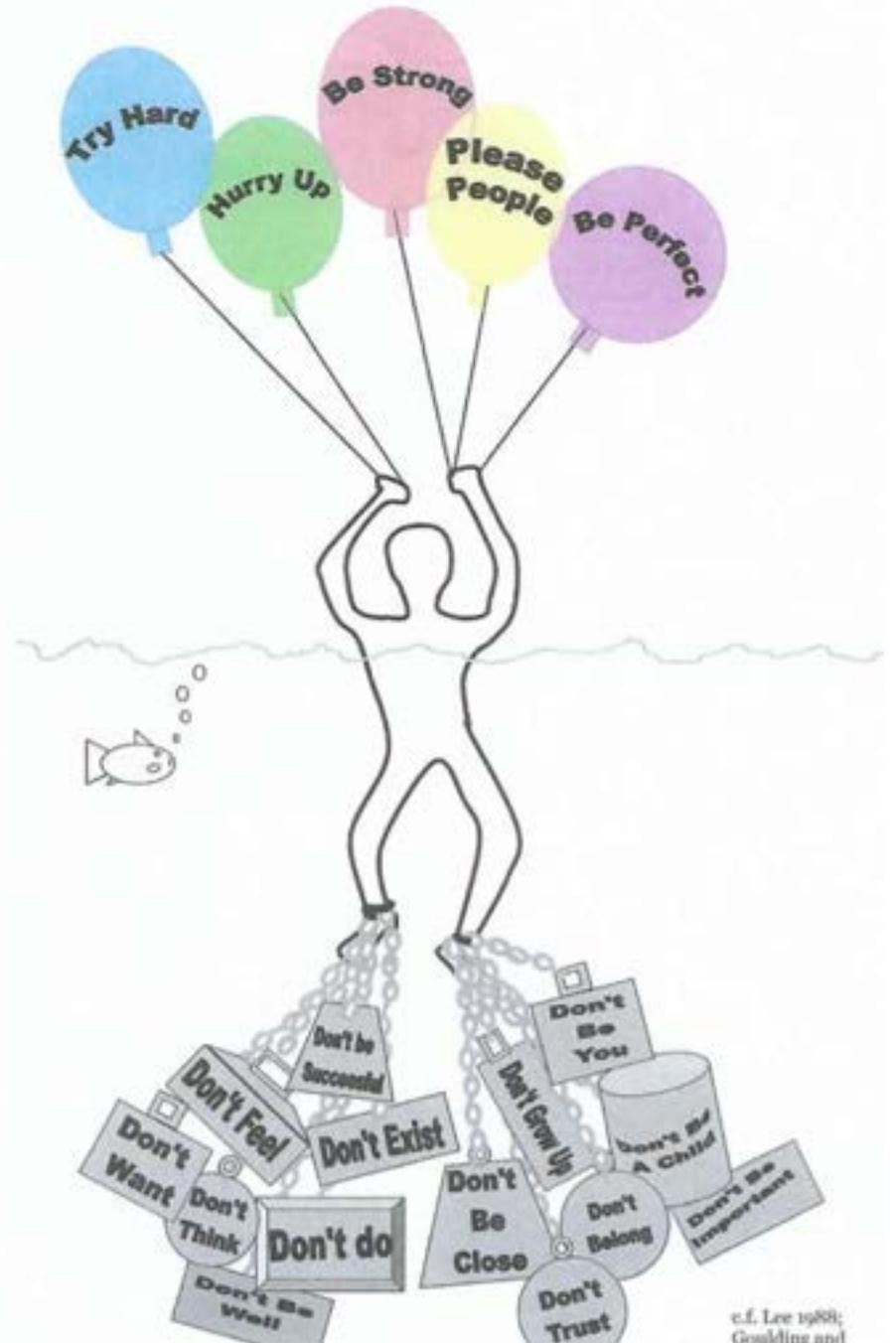
They formed part of the **'conditions of worth'** which we felt as children...

The 'Do' and 'Don't' messages from our parents / carers

... which continue to influence us into adulthood

Do...

Don't...



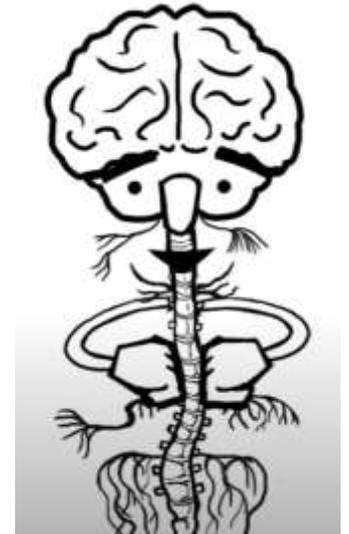
- **Drivers** are deeply ingrained behaviour patterns which we all develop as children, in response to what was overtly /covertly encouraged and approved of by our parents / carers
- **Drivers** subconsciously continue to motivate us as adults to act in the ways which BOTH generated positive, warm feelings in us AND helped us to avoid feeling bad
- Our dominant **Drivers** inevitably became part of how we now see ourselves... what 'kind of a person' we are e.g. *People Pleasers* see ourselves *and* need emotionally *to be seen* as caring, *Be Strong* types as dependable, *Be Perfect* as doing a perfect job, *etc.*
- When these qualities are recognised by others, we feel good! More significantly, *criticism of being the opposite* i.e. uncaring, undependable, imperfect *etc.* can make us feel BAD!
- Therefore, both at work and at home, our dominant **Drivers** motivate our choices and are generally what underly **unbalanced behaviours** at work and/or at home, **generating stress and blocking our capacity for self-care**
- This is why it can feel very challenging to try to **moderate our main Driver behaviours** as well as why we need to do just this – to be able to **improve self-care**

Drivers and Permissions

Driver	Overt Message	Covert Message	Permission
Be Perfect	You're only OK if you do everything perfectly and get everything right	You are no good if you get anything wrong	It is OK to be 'enough' sometimes & get things wrong i.e. be human
Please Others	You're only OK if you are pleasing and doing what is right for other people	It is wrong / selfish to ask for what you'd like or to do things for yourself	It is OK to sometimes please yourself too!
Hurry Up	You're only OK if you do everything right NOW!	It is never OK to do things in your own time	It is OK to take your time over things
Be Strong	You're only OK if you always cope. Hiding your feelings and wants from People	You are weak/bad if you show your feelings or express any needs	It is OK to be open and to take care of your own needs
Try Hard	You're only OK if you keep trying hard to do things	Trying hard is better than succeeding	It is OK to just DO it - success doesn't always have to be hard work!

Relevance of ANS (Autonomic Nervous System)

As well as maintaining automatic functions, our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) is constantly scanning the world for **cues of safety and cues of danger** – shifting our internal state in response to cues:



SAFE - Social interaction (& learning anything new)

MOBILISED - Flight/fight (& sporting activities)

IMMOBILISED - Traumatized/frozen (+ **SAFE** for sleep)

[See video clip: Trauma and the Nervous System: A Polyvagal Perspective - YouTube](#)

How Trauma (& VT) Impact ANS

Trauma (INCLUDING VT) & chronic stress change our ANS from functioning healthily

- ANS starts *faultily detecting danger everywhere!*
- **The body's resources** become **focused on surviving perceived threats**
- In place of the balanced behaviours that create health and resilience, we **resort to coping mechanisms that provide immediate threat-relief**, i.e. self-protection / numbing through withdrawal, addictions, junk food etc.



The Good News! ANS can be re-trained to function healthily again, through conscious connection, self-care & support:

- Spending time with people who are calm, happy and attuned, enables us to co-regulate to feel safe
- Exercise, getting out in Nature, yoga, dance, creativity...
- Trauma Therapy

These and many other activities **support us to restore a flexible and resilient ANS**

Four Cornerstones of Resilience

ABCCs

- Self-Awareness
- Balance
- Self-Compassion
- Connection



1. Nurturing self-awareness

Helpers are often brilliant at focussing on other people's feelings and not recognising their own.

Take time to notice more of what you are feeling, right here, right now!

- Get out of your head!
- Notice the sensations in your body
- Recognise the emotions that are there
- Allow what is there and try not to judge yourself

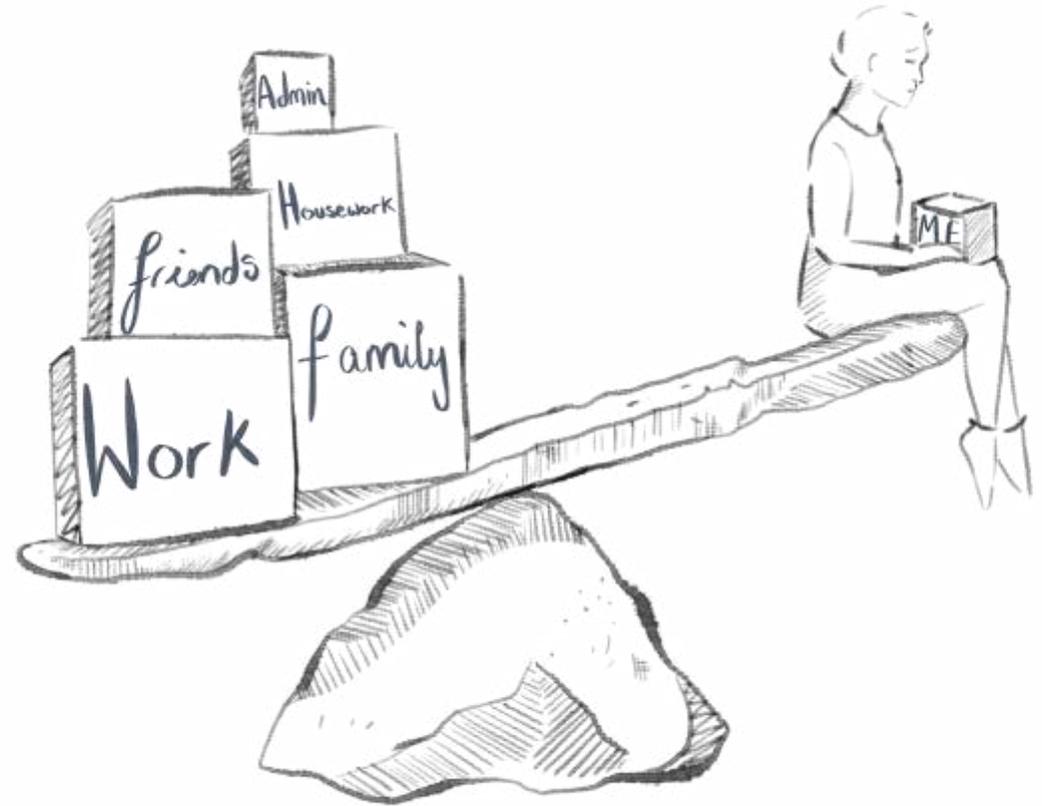


4. Maintaining Balance

Honestly assess whether you have a **healthy balance between the time that you give to others and the time that you make for yourself** – both at home and at work.

Time is needed in order to be able to relax, enjoy life and to recharge.

Remember that this is your life too!



3. Staying Connected

Stay connected to other people both at home and at work

Ensure that you are not becoming isolated or unsupported

TALK about what and how you feel to someone that you trust

Helpers benefit from the same empathic connection as they give to others



4. Practising self-compassion

Treat yourself like you would treat your best friend – **be kind to yourself** – like you are to others

Notice your inner critical voice and try to replace him or her with an inner ‘best friend’



Three key elements of active self-care which strengthen resilience in Helpers

Active self-care for VT can be linked to what we do with our energy

We need to plan and protect time to regularly include ALL three of these different types of activity:

- **Grounding our energy**
- **Releasing negative energy**
- **Re-charging positive energy**

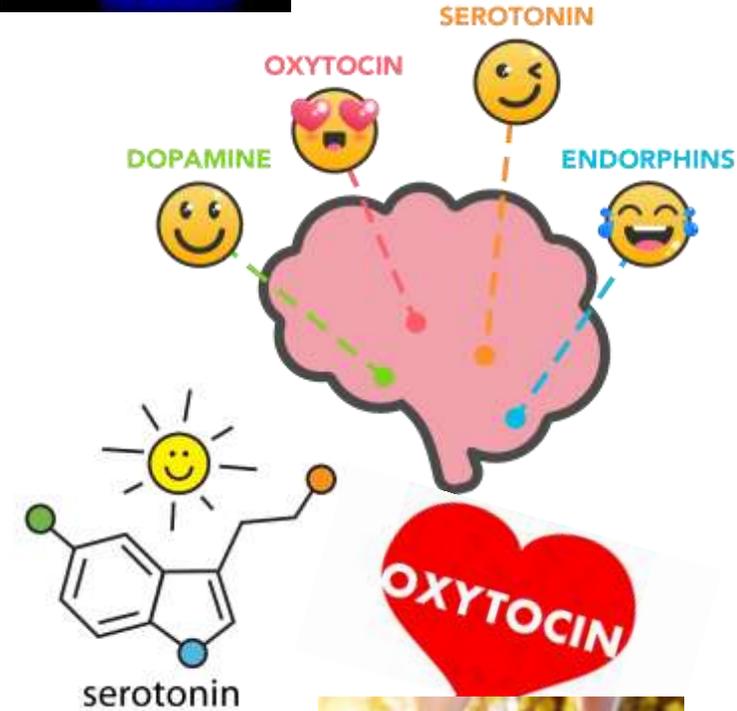
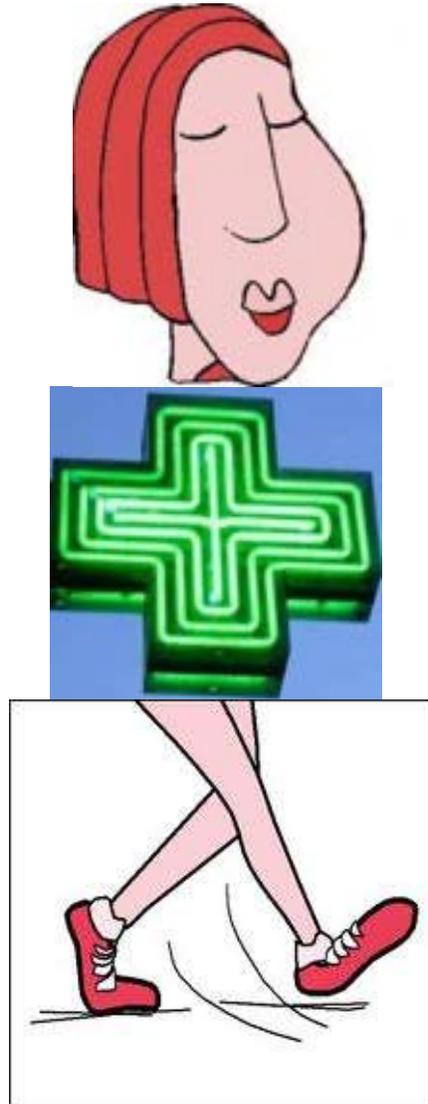
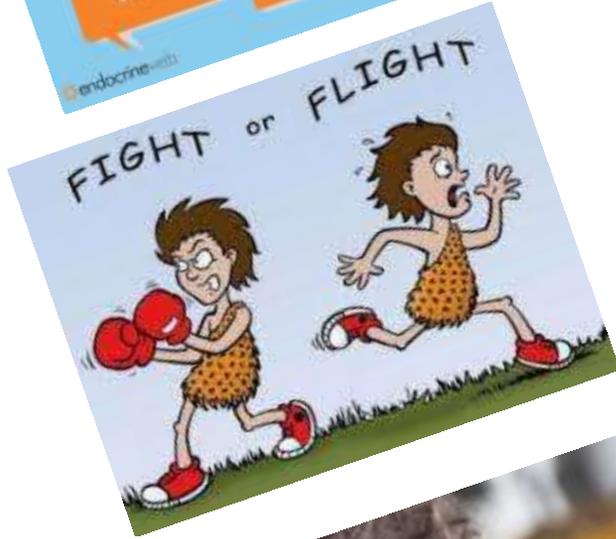


We are walking pharmacies!

ADRENALINE: FAST FACTS

- Dilates pupils to improve vision
- Rapid effects last a few minutes to an hour
- Decreases sensitivity to pain
- Increases heart rate, blood flow and alertness

endocrine



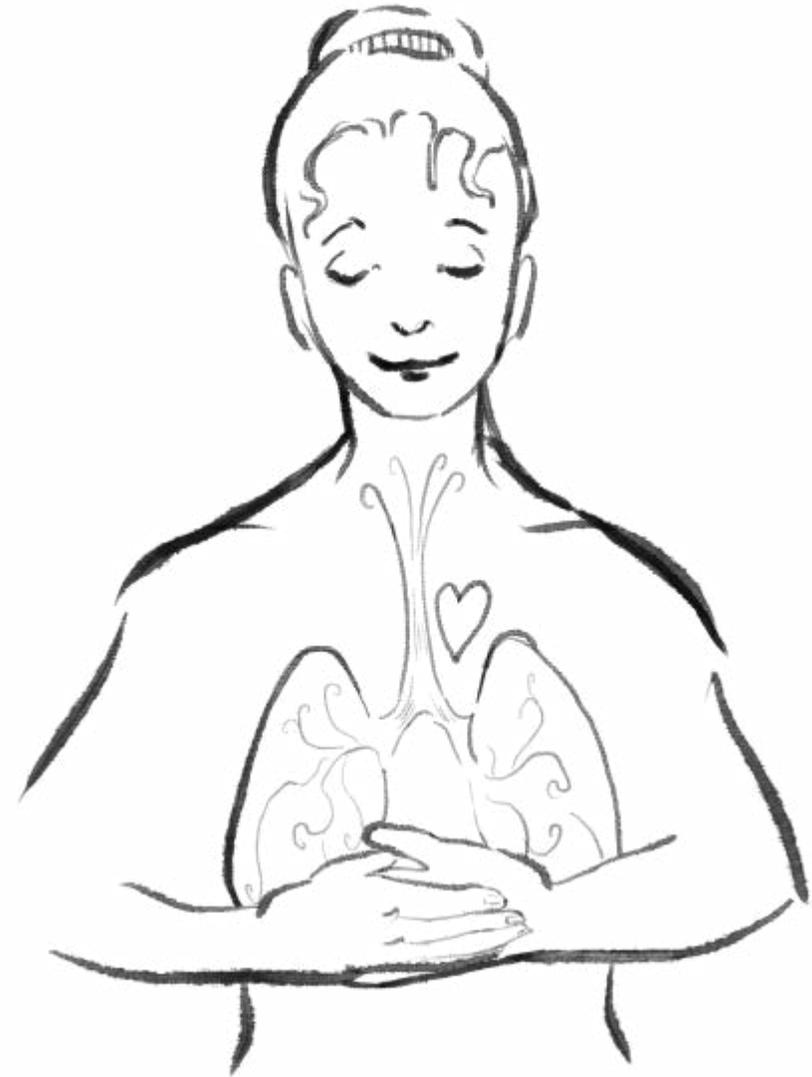
1. Grounding our energy

When you are helping others, and in between time, as much as possible, try to stay grounded, like this:

- **Feel your feet on the ground, consciously breathing deeper into your belly, and be aware of what you can feel in your body**

Staying grounded helps us to feel solid and centred and present.

This feels good for us and by anyone we are helping.



2. Releasing negative energy

Animals instinctively do this and prevent the build-up of stress! A Zebra 'shakes out' the adrenalin in its body, after the lion has gone!

This is done through activities involving vigorous exhalation:

- Aerobic exercise – running, swimming, dancing, surfing, martial arts etc.
- Singing along top volume in the shower or car or shouting your lungs out at a match!

... these actively help to **release stored adrenalin and stress from the suffering, tension and trauma** which your body has mirrored and absorbed, from empathically supporting other's suffering and trauma

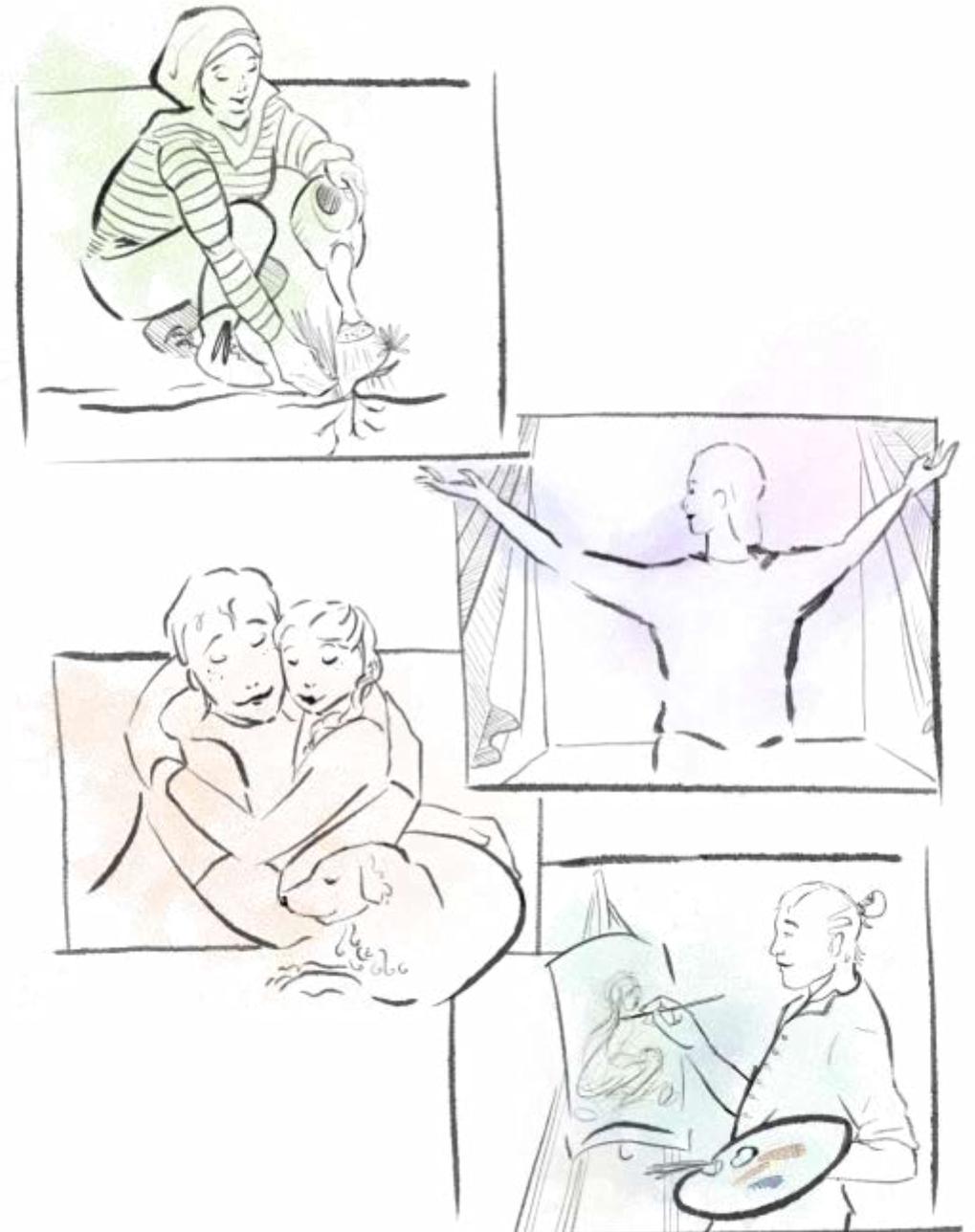


3. Re-charging positive energy

Do things which feed and re-charge your **connection to the meaning you feel in life and to something BIGGER than yourself, such as:**

- Spending relaxed time with **people you love**, with friends and pets
- **Physical contact** like hugs and sex
- **Being outside** in nature, gardening, walking and if you are spiritual, praying
- **Play and creative activities** of all kinds
- Whatever **spiritual or religious** practices connect you to feeling part of the Universe

These things all help generate feel-good body chemicals and really help you to re-charge and stay well



Monitoring impact

A way to screen yourself for the feelings, thoughts, behaviours and physical symptoms which, over time, can indicate VT.

Monitoring Impact	
Rate each statement either rarely (R) sometimes (S) or frequently (F) for your experience <u>over the past month</u> . Consider discussing with a supervisor or trusted colleague, focussing on any high scoring (F) responses and monitoring <u>month by month</u> to identify any recurring patterns.	
FEELINGS	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt overwhelmed, emotionally exhausted or depressed
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt enraged or very sad about the situation of someone/ those I am supporting
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt hopeless and despairing that anything can improve
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt that everything rests on my shoulders; that I can never do enough
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt overly involved emotionally with someone/ those I am supporting
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt trapped; that I have no choice but to keep doing this work
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt detached or numb; less able to empathise with others (work/home)
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt guilty about my life in the presence of clients
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have felt little pleasure in everyday life (work/home)
THOUGHTS	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am preoccupied with thoughts of someone/ those I am supporting - outside of work
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have fantasies of rescuing clients
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have dissociative moments, nightmares or unwanted imagery
<input type="checkbox"/>	I believe that my work is useless and I am ineffective
<input type="checkbox"/>	I feel cynical about clients/their situation
<input type="checkbox"/>	I dread coming to work or think of avoiding someone/ those I am supporting
<input type="checkbox"/>	I see danger and feel a heightened sense of vulnerability and personal threat
<input type="checkbox"/>	I minimise/discount other pain (family/my own) as 'not as bad' as people I support at work
<input type="checkbox"/>	I think that no-one outside work understands
BEHAVIOURS	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am always working and busy (at home/work) and uneasy if not
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am finding it harder to maintain professional boundaries at work
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am avoiding work and/or taking more time off
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am finding it harder to listen to client's stories of traumatic experiences
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am making more mistakes
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am more distant, detached and cut-off from others (at work/home)
<input type="checkbox"/>	I no longer want to see friends or take time relaxing or playing with family/friends
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am finding it harder to be intimate
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am using alcohol/drugs/other ways of 'not feeling' more frequently
PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS - circle (or add any not mentioned)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor sleep; increased or decreased appetite; regular physical pain e.g., headaches, stomach aches; increased or frequent illness or deep tiredness... Other?



Monitoring Self-care

The second side to the monitoring checklist to take away and monitor the 4 cornerstones of resilience and three energy activities which help to build resilience and maintain self-care.

Monitoring Self-Care		
This form is designed to support you to try and include specific elements of self-care which research shows really support well-being and help to build resilience in Helpers.		
4 Cornerstones (ABCCs)		How am I doing?
Self- <u>A</u> wareness	What can I feel in my body? What is this telling me about what I need?	
<u>B</u> alance	How balanced is my life – at work and at home?	
<u>C</u> onnection	How connected to others do I feel – at work and at home?	
Self- <u>C</u> ompassion	Am I able to accept what I feel and what I need? Treat myself like a best friend?	
Boosting my 'feel-good' chemicals (GRR!)		How am I doing?
<u>G</u> rounding Reconnecting with the breath and centring our energy	How often do I ground and centre my energy? Is it a habit?	
<u>R</u> eleasing Discharging stress chemicals	What aerobic activities do I do (running, swimming, dancing, singing etc.?) How often?	
<u>R</u> e-charging Getting more DOSE 'feel-good' chemicals	What am I doing to top up my Dopamine, Oxytocin, Serotonin and Endorphins?	
Action planning		
What can get in the way? What would I like to change, do more of etc.?		

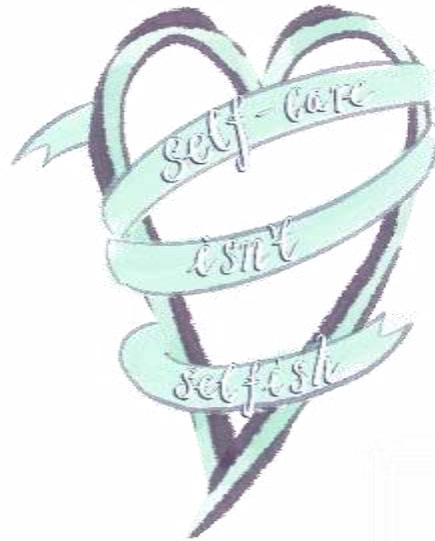


Reaching out

If you recognise any of the signs of VT in yourself, don't suffer in silence!

Speak to someone who can help you to put in place what will help you recover.

And if you recognise the signs of VT in someone else, be brave and speak to them about it.



Thank-you for being here today
We really hope that this information will support you
Remember! Helpers are just as important as the people care for
VT Awareness & pro-active self-care are a WIN-WIN for everyone

**For more information out VT or to contact us
about VT training, go to:
www.vicarious-traumatisation.com**



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Illustrations by Eleanor Barlow

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McKay, L. and Pearlman, L.A. (2008) *Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma*, Headington Institute, Online Training Module 4

Pearlman, L. and Saakvitne, K. (1997) *Transforming the pain: Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization*; W. W. Norton & Company

Van Dernoot Lipsky, L. (2009) *Trauma Stewardship. An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*; Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco

Internet links

1. David Berceli (TRE -Trauma Release Exercises- Berceli Foundation)

http://www.bercelifoundation.org/s/1340/aff_2_home.aspx Video introduction to TRE: <https://vimeo.com/103209258>

2. Brene Brown (Empathy) On empathy (3 mins): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewgu369Jw>

3. Gwen Dewar Ph.D. (Empathy and the brain) – Excellent article online: <http://www.parentingscience.com/empathy-and-the-brain.html>

4. Kristin Neff (Self-compassion) TedTalk: ‘The space between self-esteem and self-Compassion’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTZBUSplr4>

5. Deepika Sheleff (Somatic coach techniques for stress and anxiety release) ‘Shake and stomp’ your anxious tension energy away! Sounds a little crazy but it's fun!

Bioenergetic stress tip 1 (Shaking): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nui5_SYCpDo

Bioenergetic stress tip 2 (Grounding/’Stomping’): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huxVVEGS6yg>

6. Dan Siegel (On the neuroscientific basis of empathy)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnvSRvmRIgA&list=PLDCtwyPSjhINEz4xuzxt6Tdsnyt2vChiB&index=6>

7. Trauma and the Nervous System: A Polyvagal Perspective: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdlQRxwT1I0>

8. Neuroplasticity experiment (1994, Harvard, Pascual-Leone)

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1580438,00.html>

9. The Research of Candace Pert, PhD. Your Body is Your Subconscious Mind: Mind-Body Medicine Becomes the Science of Psychoneuroimmunology <http://www.healingcancer.info/ebook/candace-pert>

10. The empathy switch | Sammy Batt-Rawden | TEDxNHS <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN9VwX2rUqk>