

## WARNING SIGNS: VICARIOUS TRAUMA, SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS AND COMPASSION FATIGUE

LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE ONE'S OWN WARNING SIGNS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE (CF) AND VICARIOUS/SECONDARY TRAUMA (VT/STS) SERVES A TWO-FOLD PURPOSE:

First, it can serve as an important check-in process for someone who has been feeling unhappy and dissatisfied, but does not have the words to explain what was happening to them. Secondly, developing a warning system allows you to track your levels of emotional and physical depletion. It also offers you tools and strategies that you can implement right away.

**What a warning system may look like:** If you were to learn to identify your CF/STS symptoms on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the worst you have ever felt about your work/compassion/energy, and 1 being the best that you have ever felt). Then, you learn to identify what an 8 or a 9 looks like for you i.e. "when I'm getting up to an 8, I notice it because I don't return phone calls, think about calling in sick a lot and can't watch any violence on TV" or "I know that I'm moving towards a 7 when I turn down my best friend's invitation to go out for dinner because I'm too drained to talk to someone else, and when I stop exercising."

Being able to recognize that your level of CF/STS is creeping up to the red zone is the most effective way to implement strategies immediately before things get worse. Perhaps when approaching an 8, you may not take on new clients with a trauma history, take a day off a week, or return to see a therapist.



In order for you to develop your warning scale, start by developing an understanding and an increased awareness of your own symptoms of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma/STS. In their book *Transforming the Pain*, Saakvitne and Pearlman (1996) have suggested that we look at symptoms on three levels: physical, behavioural and psychological/emotional. Here are a few examples:

**Physical Warning Signs:** What part of your body lets you know when you are headed for trouble? Do you have recurrent physical symptoms and when they manifest themselves, do you ignore, medicate or slow down?

**Behavioural Signs:** Increased anger, tearfulness, watching excessive amounts of TV/spending too much time online, increased use of alcohol or drugs, compulsive shopping, binge eating, watching high trauma media as entertainment – these are just a few warning signs that you may be relying on those behaviours to self-medicate and “numb out” after work.



**Emotional/Psychological Signs:** Feeling emotionally exhausted, depression, guilt, a sense of hopelessness, a reduced ability to feel empathy towards clients or family/friends. A sense of resentment towards demands being put on you at work and at home. There are many emotional warning signs and your close friends and colleagues may notice these changes before you do.

**Take Stock:** Try and identify your top three most frequent warning signs. We call them the “big three”. Are they all physical, emotional or behavioural or do you see a mixture of signs from each category? Would you say that you are currently in the Green (healthy), Yellow (warning sign) or Red zone with your overall functioning?

Now, ask a loved one or close colleague to share with you what they think your “Big Three” warning signs are, at home and at work.





**Next Steps:** Each warning sign has specific tools that can help reduce your levels of stress. For example, if you are experiencing a lot of secondary exposure-related symptoms, you may wish to examine your caseload, the availability of debriefing and grounding strategies and you may need to assess the level of extraneous trauma images and stories that you are exposing yourself to in your personal life. If you have a lot of emotional symptoms, you may want to consider a consultation with a well-trained mental health professional who is familiar with vicarious trauma and the nature of the work that you do.

Are Suicidal or hopeless thoughts? Get Help Now! Please remember that no matter how stressful/traumatic our work is, it is not a normal consequence of VT/STS to experience suicidal thoughts or prolonged bouts of depression or hopelessness. Please seek help as soon as you notice these symptoms in yourself. If you are worried about confidentiality, or unsure where to turn, please consult online sources of support. There are urgent suicide support hotlines available 24/7 which you can find with a click of the web. Don't suffer alone. Get help. You deserve it and so do the people who love you.

**For more information and resources go to [www.tenadademy.ca](http://www.tenadademy.ca)**

