

Research has shown that the human nervous system responds to seeing violence or trauma almost as strongly as if the violence or trauma were directly experienced. This is called secondary or “Vicarious Trauma.” Those who watch violence or trauma happen to other people, whether in person or on a screen far removed physically from the actual incident(s), still experience the effects of trauma. Vicarious trauma happens when someone absorbs the emotional and psychological weight of another person’s acute pain, made worse by repeated exposure to violent images.

Vicarious trauma differs from empathy. Empathy is a feeling for others, a connection to others. Empathy can provide energy to positively engage to alleviate suffering and make the effort to change the circumstances that led to the suffering. Empathy happens in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, allowing humans to simulate others' emotions themselves, share their feelings, and understand other’s intentions. Empathy leads to both automatic reactions and intentional compassionate responses. Vicarious trauma, on the other hand, is a physiological stress response that’s indistinguishable from direct exposure to trauma. Trauma responses (the impulse to either fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) originate in the reptilian brain (or brainstem/basal ganglia), which dictates instinctive survival behaviors.

Many who experience vicarious trauma dismiss their feelings and experiences “because it didn’t happen to them.” But those who experience vicarious trauma have just as much need to address it as those who experience primary, direct trauma. **Signs of vicarious trauma** vary, but often mirror those suffering direct trauma exposure:

- **Emotional Distress**
 - Persistent feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness, or guilt after viewing, reading or hearing about tragedy or disaster
 - Feelings of numbness – not experiencing any feelings
 - Lack of interest in or enjoyment of activities that formerly brought enjoyment
- **Intrusive Thoughts**
 - Repeated, unwanted images or thoughts about the tragedy or disaster
- **Physical Symptoms**
 - Unexplained fatigue, headaches, stomachaches, muscle pain
 - Changed reactions: food losing its taste, disinterest in sexual activity, not caring about showering or clean clothes
- **Avoidance Behaviors**
 - Reluctance to watch or listen to the news, engage with social media, or discuss distressing events
- **Hyperarousal**
 - A sense of being constantly on edge, trouble sleeping, or heightened anxiety

- **Negative Changes in Worldview**
 - Becoming more fearful about personal safety
 - Having a more despairing or even apocalyptic view of humanity and the future
 - Becoming estranged from faith or belief in God

Recovery from trauma, whether primary or secondary, involves both psychological healing and spiritual healing. A spiritual response to trauma involves processing pain through meaning-making, prayer and mindfulness, and reconnecting with God or a higher power. Spiritual responses to trauma foster resilience and post-traumatic growth. Spiritual response to trauma provides comfort, hope and renewal as long as it isn't a false spirituality. False spirituality ignores or denies honest emotions or tries to force forgiveness or premature reconciliation.

Healthy spiritual responses to trauma include:

- **Recontextualizing the Experience**
 - Making sense of trauma through spiritual beliefs, which can lead to deeper purpose, empathy, and a "new normal"
- **Spiritual Practices**
 - Engaging in prayer, meditation, mindfulness or contemplation to find peace in mind and soul
 - Engaging in yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong or other bodily-focused, calming practices, to soothe the nervous system and relax the body
- **Address Spiritual Struggles**
 - Trauma threatens world view and often causes loss of meaning
 - Feelings of abandonment or betrayal by God or the universe, anger at God or at other people, and loss of faith or belief system need to be acknowledged rather than suppressed
- **Community and Ritual**
 - It is hard to heal from trauma in isolation
 - Spiritual communities can provide support, allow for doubt, acknowledge despair
 - offer psychic and spiritual energy to the traumatized who have lost psychic and spiritual energy
 - Spiritual communities have healing rituals and spaces
 - Often using creative arts such as music, drumming, sacred storytelling, guided imagery, to process pain and to help connect to a higher power or energy

- **Reclaiming Authenticity**
 - True spirituality needs to be distinguished from toxic or coercive religious dogmas that may delay real recovery (that may even have contributed to trauma)
 - True spirituality doesn't avoid or deny pain, but supports healing and recovery

The Charlemont Federated Church, its leaders and members are all committed to recognizing trauma in personal lives, in the community and in the larger world, and to approaching pain not only practically but spiritually, seeking wholeness and restoration on multiple levels. Let someone know if you are experiencing primary or vicarious trauma, so that you can be supported. Also let us know if you would like to lead an exercise, practice, or class to cope with vicarious trauma, or would be a prayer partner to support someone experiencing vicarious trauma.

BonnieJo Radasch developed a guide for Silent Meditation which CFC is now hosting on Thursday mornings at 9:00 AM in the Church Library, to lift up Healing, Hope and Connection to our hurting world. Church and community members are invited to join in person, or to pray and meditate from their own homes at the same time – 9:00 – 9:45 am. A printed guide to the suggested Meditation is available in the Church Library, or can be requested to be emailed as a pdf.