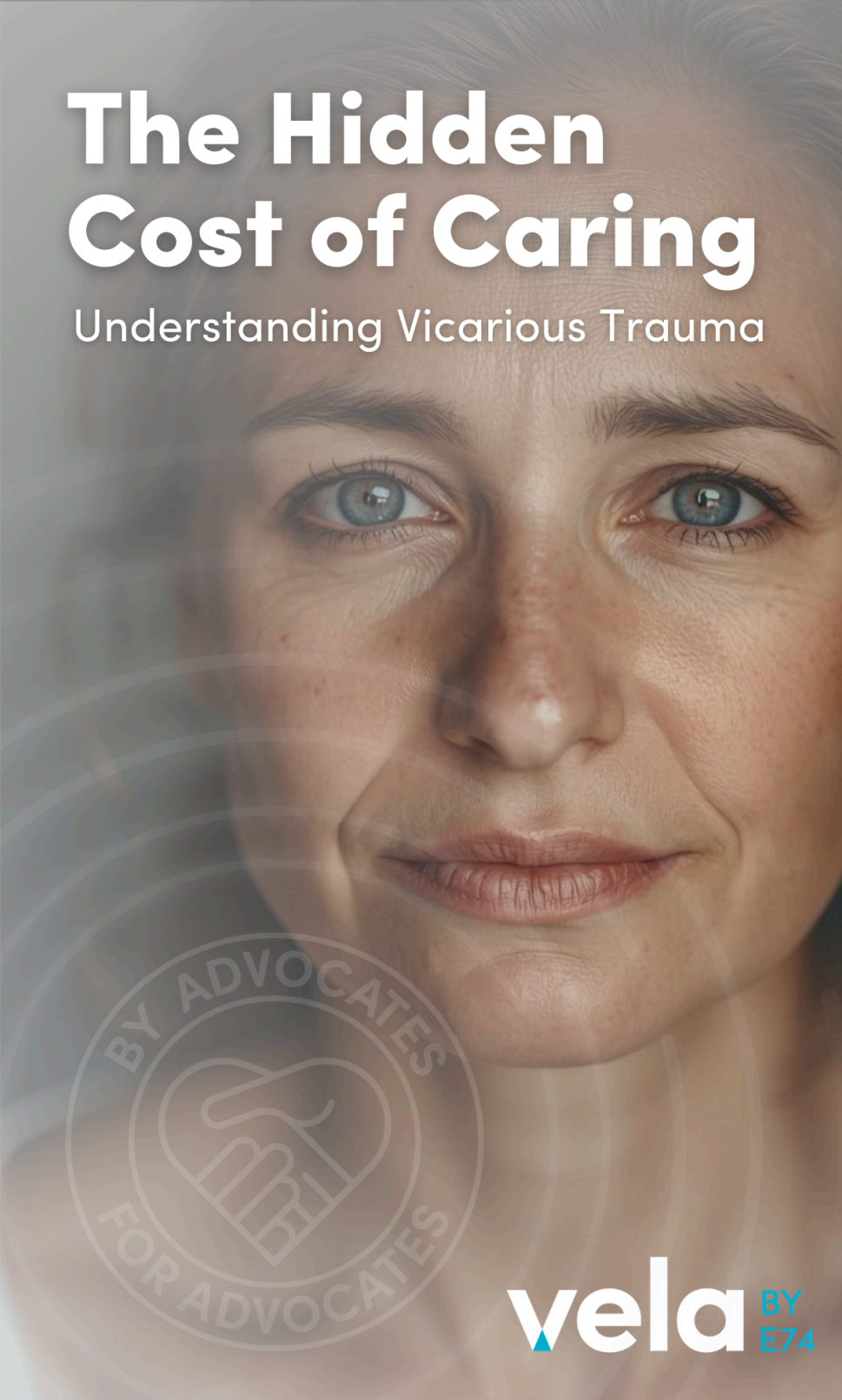


The Hidden Cost of Caring

Understanding Vicarious Trauma



vela BY E74

The Hidden Cost of Caring:

Understanding Vicarious Trauma

Advocacy is an act of profound courage. Every day, you sit with people in their darkest moments, witness their strength, and help them navigate impossible choices. You hold stories that most people never hear, stories that can stay with you long after the workday ends.

Because you care so deeply, the impact of this work inevitably touches you too.

This impact has a name: vicarious trauma.

At Vela, many of us have worked in advocacy. We've sat in crisis rooms, listened to disclosures, written safety plans, and held space for survivors through the difficult chapters of their lives. We understand more than most the emotional cost of caring, and we know how easily helpers can forget to extend the same compassion to themselves.

This article is our way of standing beside you, honoring your work, naming what you might be feeling, and offering tools that can help you stay grounded and well.

What is Vicarious Trauma?

Vicarious trauma is the impact that can occur when you are repeatedly exposed to the trauma of others. It is a normal human response to caring deeply for people who have endured harm.

Research performed by Lisa McCann and Lauri Anne Pearlman, clinical psychologists, describes vicarious trauma as a shift in how supporters see the world, themselves, and others. Because advocates absorb stories of violence, violation, and fear, their view can be slowly reshaped by what they witness, even if they were not directly harmed.

If you've ever left work feeling heavy, exhausted, or "not quite yourself," you're not alone. Vicarious trauma affects advocates, case managers, hotline staff, shelter workers, program leaders, and anyone who supports survivors. We too, feel the impact, as we care for the stories of millions of survivors and their data.

How Vicarious Trauma Shows Up

Vicarious trauma can be subtle at first. It may be something you feel before you can name. Over time, it may show up as:

Emotional Indicators

- Feeling drained or numb
- Increased irritability or frustration
- Feeling more tearful, anxious, on edge
- Difficulty experiencing joy or connection
- A growing sense of hopelessness

Cognitive Indicators

- Trouble concentrating
- Intrusive thoughts about survivor stories
- Difficulty making decisions

- A shift toward expecting danger or worst-case scenarios
- Feeling overly responsible for survivor outcomes

Physical Indicators

- Fatigue despite rest
- Headaches, tension, or stomach issues
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling jumpy or overstimulated

Relational Indicators

- Withdrawing from friends or coworkers
- Feeling disconnected from loved ones
- Reduced patience or empathy
- Wanting to isolate

Work-Related Indicators

- Dreading shifts
- Feeling burned out
- Feeling guilty for needing breaks or time
- Avoiding certain tasks or types of cases
- Questioning your competence, purpose, or effectiveness

If any of these resonate, it may be a reflection of the intensity of the work, and it is absolutely valid.

Why Vicarious Trauma Happens

The combination of repeated exposure, high emotional stakes, limited resources, urgency, and the moral weight of the work creates a fertile ground for secondary trauma. Many advocates also bring their own lived experiences into their roles, which can deepen both compassion and vulnerability. Add to this:

- Ongoing crises
- Staffing shortages
- Administrative pressures

- Long hours
- Abundant data entry requirements
- Grant-reporting demands
- Community violence
- Increasing service responsibilities

...and the emotional load becomes even heavier.

This is why talking about vicarious trauma is essential to sustaining this work.

How to Recognize It in Yourself

Vicarious trauma often creeps in quietly. Many advocates don't notice it until they're overwhelmed. These questions can help you gently check in with yourself:

- Has my worldview shifted in ways I can't explain?
- Do I feel constantly tired, even after sleeping?
- Is it getting harder to separate work from my personal life?
- Do I feel myself disconnecting from people I care about?
- Have I been more reactive or withdrawn lately?
- Am I still finding meaning in my work, or does it feel hollow?
- Do I feel numb or overly affected by client stories?
- Am I hypervigilant?
- Have I over-attached my identity to the work I am doing?
- Have I become cynical?
- Am I experiencing physical symptoms?

If you recognize yourself in these questions, you are not alone, and you're not doing anything wrong. You're simply carrying too much.

What Helps: Practical Strategies

These strategies are meant to help you care for yourself gently, realistically, and within the constraints of advocacy work.

1. Create Emotional Boundaries

You can care deeply without absorbing every story. Try:

- Pausing after difficult conversations
- Practicing a grounding technique before and after high-intensity tasks
- Creating rituals that help you transition out of work mode

Example: *"I'm going to loop in another advocate to support this conversation."*

2. Debrief for Crisis... and for Care

Talking with a trusted supervisor helps transform isolation into connection. Debriefing is not gossip, venting, or complaining; it's processing. Invite questions like:

- "Can I share something heavy with you?"
- "How are you holding up today?"
- "Do you have the capacity to debrief with me?"

This should be brief, synergistic, and support-focused.

3. Build Micro-Rest Into Your Day

We know the reality: many advocates don't get long breaks. So think *micro*, not *massive*. Examples:

- A slow, deep breath between calls
- A 30-second stretch
- Stepping outside for fresh air
- Drinking water before opening your next case note

4. Set Realistic Expectations

You cannot be everything to everyone.

Reminder: *"I can walk with someone through their crisis, but I cannot control their outcome."*

5. Seek Supportive Supervision

Healthy supervision includes:

- Space to talk about emotional impact
- Clarity around boundaries
- Guidance on navigating complex cases
- Validation and encouragement

If your agency culture allows it, request emotional check-ins. This approach aligns with trauma stewardship, which emphasizes ongoing reflection and shared responsibility for the emotional impact of bearing witness to trauma.

6. Notice Early Signs and Respond with Compassion

If you're feeling off, your first instinct may be to push through. Instead, try acknowledging it: "I am carrying a lot today. I can offer myself kindness." Self-kindness can reduce stress reactivity and help you recover more quickly after hard moments.

7. Reconnect With Meaning

Advocates can lose their sense of purpose when overwhelmed. Reconnecting affirms why your work matters. Try:

- Revisiting a past success story
- Reading an encouraging note
- Shifting focus from outcomes to presence and support
- Adopting resilience and strength

Example: *"What am I learning from survivors that strengthens me?"*

Organizational Strategies That Help Protect Staff

While individual strategies matter, vicarious trauma is also an organizational responsibility. The most resilient teams are the ones that take shared responsibility for emotional well-being. Agencies can support staff by:

- Encouraging wellness breaks
- Offering routine reflection
- Reducing unnecessary admin burden
- Normalizing conversations about emotional health
- Ensuring caseloads are realistic
- Predictable scheduling
- Transparent decision-making
- Training on trauma stewardship
- Leadership modeling a culture of care

Advocates should never feel guilty for being impacted by trauma. Agencies can help ensure they don't have to.

We're Here to Support You

At Vela, we see you. We recognize the emotional load of this field. Many of us have carried it ourselves. We want you to be able to continue doing this work in a way that doesn't cost you your well-being.

Vicarious trauma is real, and you don't have to navigate it alone.

Your care for survivors is profound. Our care is for you.

Want to learn new ways to simplify your work or explore features you may not be using yet? Visit veladirect.com or reach out to our team. We're always here to help.



Developed with input from advocates at every stage, Vela by Element 74 is a trauma-informed case management and reporting platform built specifically for domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking organizations.

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Important Definitions:

Vicarious Traumatization: Thought pattern, worldview, and schema shifts after exposure to the trauma of others

Secondary Traumatic Stress: Trauma-like symptoms from indirect exposure

Burnout: Chronic workplace stress/overload; depletion due to system conditions

Trauma Stewardship: Sustainable, justice- rooted approaches to caring for self while caring for others.

When to Seek Professional Therapy or Medical Support: Reach out if you're experiencing persistent anxiety or depression, intrusive thoughts, sleep disruption, difficulty functioning at work or home, increased substance use, or feelings of hopelessness. If you are ever in immediate crisis or concerned about your safety, please contact local emergency services or a crisis hotline in your area.