

Human Resources & Employees

Sexual harassment in the workplace: vicarious trauma



Sexual harassment in the workplace has the potential not only to harm and traumatize those who are targeted by harassers, but it can also erode the feeling of overall safety in the workplace.

Anyone who is exposed to sexual harassment may experience one or more psychological impacts as a result of vicarious trauma, including:

- Administrators who adjudicate, discipline or accommodate employees involved in a sexual harassment report.
- Sexual harassment investigators.
- Sexual harassment support workers.
- Bystanders or co-workers who have witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace or had the details disclosed to them.

Vicarious trauma refers to the indirect trauma that can occur when people are exposed to difficult or disturbing information, second-hand. There are several physical and psychological signs which serve as “red flag” indicators that you may be experiencing vicarious trauma. Listed are a common few:

- Exhaustion, insomnia or headaches.
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs.
- Cynicism, anger and irritability at home and/or at work.
- Avoidance.
- Watching excessive amounts of tv/Netflix at night.
- Not returning phone calls at work and/or at home.
- Avoiding colleagues and staff gatherings.
- Impaired ability to make decisions.
- Emotional exhaustion.
- Negative self-image.
- Depression and increased anxiety.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Impaired appetite or binge eating.
- Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy towards clients or family/friends.

If you are experiencing a few or more of these “red flags” you may need to consider the benefits of inviting in an external mental health expert to address the psychological impacts of sexual harassment on the work environment and employees generally.

A mental health professional can work with you to safeguard your mental health and everyone who works with you. A mental health professional can help identify vicarious trauma in the workplace; institute regular debriefing sessions; co-create individual and collective self-care strategies; and offer individual or group counselling sessions.