

TYES Frontline Workers' Toolkit

VICARIOUS TRAUMA &

SELF-CARE TOOLKIT



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INTRODUCTION

The mental and emotional weight of frontline work is taking a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual toll on workers who are bearing witness to multiple devastating, traumatic loss events on a level that many never anticipated they would encounter in their work!

Responding to increasing rates of traumatic events, mental health crisis, drug poisonings, and multiple loss, is the current reality that's leading to chronic stress, burnout and vicarious trauma from working in a constant state of alert and distress.

This toolkit was updated by [Chris Leonard](#), in partnership with the City of Toronto through the [Toronto Youth Equity Strategy \(TYES\)](#) to increase awareness of vicarious trauma and provide tools to help minimize the impact of witnessing pain and suffering at work.

[The Toronto Youth Equity Strategy](#) aims to build resiliency and access to supportive systems for youth most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime (MVP youth). TYES includes 28 recommendations and 110 actions the City of Toronto will take to provide better services and out- comes for vulnerable youth. TYES was adopted unanimously by City Council in February 2014.

The [TYES Creative Report](#) can be found online at: toronto.ca

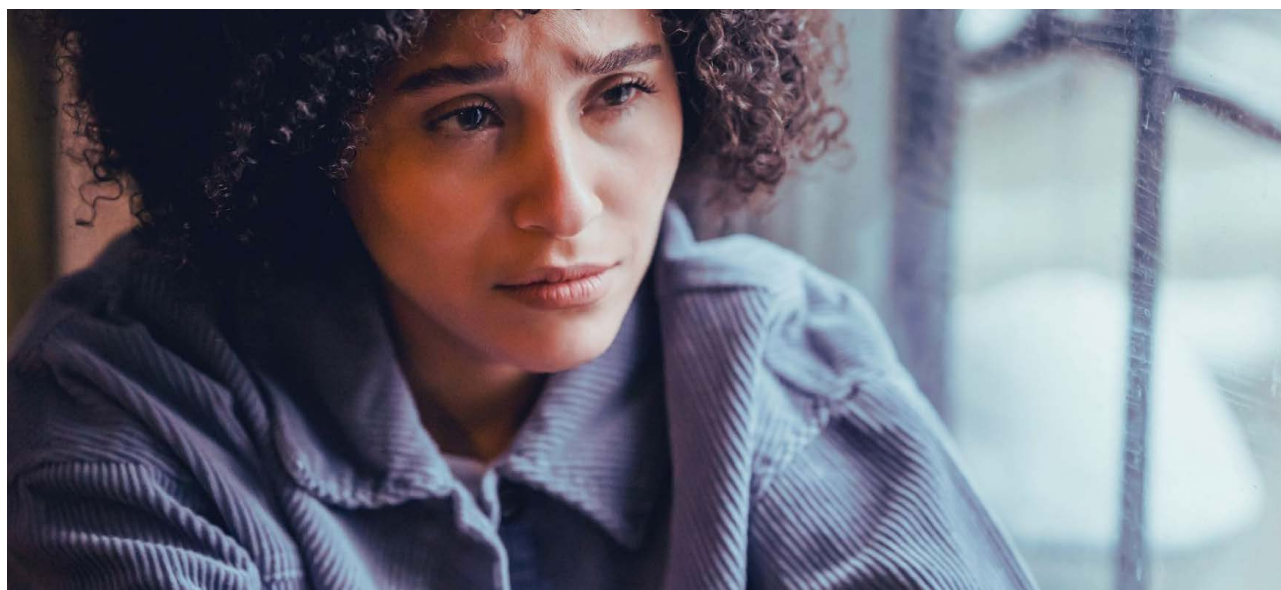
TYES is on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram at: [TorontoTYES](#)

This toolkit aims to provide information and practical tools to assist workers dealing with the stressors and challenges of the work.

THIS WORK COSTS!

The current reality of frontline work has shifted significantly over the last few years. Showing up with heart to make a difference in people's lives while working in a 'grind' culture that values productivity, pushes many of us to work to the point of exhaustion. The cumulative impact of the living and working with loss and change, layers of complexity, uncertainty and collective grief, in these heart-wrenching times, is taxing to the nervous system.

THIS WORK COSTS



“We live in a culture that interprets burnout quite lightheartedly....rather than a way for us to consider that a person is far beyond their capacity right now.”

(Dr Taslim Alani-Verjee, Toronto psychologist)

**“HOW DO YOU LET YOURSELF OPEN UP ABOUT
YOUR FEELINGS, WHEN YOU’RE CONSTANTLY
DEALING WITH ONE TRAUMA AFTER ANOTHER?
IN JUST ONE WEEK, I HAD A YOUTH SHOT,
SOMEONE DIED SUDDENLY FROM A SUSPECTED
OVERDOSE AND ANOTHER ONE ARRESTED!”**

(YOUTH WORKER | JULY 2019)



PHOTO BY NATASHA KASIM ON UNSPLASH

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a grey ribbed sweater, is sitting at a wooden table. She has her right hand pressed against her forehead, with her fingers spread, suggesting distress or grief. Her eyes are closed, and her expression is somber. In front of her on the table is a white ceramic mug with a blue rim. The background is dark and out of focus.

**GRIEF, LOSS AND
TRAUMA WILL COME
TO WORK!**

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TRAUMA

- Trauma is a Greek word for wound or pierce
- Trauma is just being overwhelmed by something that is deeply distressing or disturbing
- Trauma can affect every aspect of our being, our sense of self, our sense of safety, our ability to regulate emotions, and our ability to relate with others.

BIG 'T' TRAUMA

- Big T trauma relates to life threatening events and situations
- Big T trauma could be a natural disaster, war, gender-based violence, violent crimes, a shooting, a serious crash or fire, etc.,
- Big T trauma could also relate to the death of a loved one, or chronic (ongoing) trauma, such as repeated abuse.

LITTLE 'T' TRAUMA

- Little 't' trauma is anything that affect our ability to feel safe in our bodies or in our relationship with others
- Little 't' trauma relates to injury, loosing a job, relationship breakup, death of a pet, or bullying at work
- Little 't' trauma is often downplayed or dismissed.

“Those who experience single traumas feel like they have lost their mind, but those who have experienced multiple traumas feel like that have lost themselves.” (Trauma and Recovery, Judith Herman)

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- Vicarious trauma is a wounding of the spirit that happens over time when we are exposed to someone else's trauma
- The term was first identified by Charley Figley in the 1980s as "the cost of caring"
- It is the profound change that occurs in our personal and professional lives due to exposure to traumatic events directly or indirectly from hearing stories and reading materials
- It can affect every aspect of our being (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social)

"We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren't sick, but we aren't ourselves." (Charles Figley, 1995)

SIGNS OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA

- | | |
|---|--|
| → Intrusive thoughts | → Fatigue |
| → Flashbacks | → Headaches |
| → Nightmares, intense dreams and trouble sleeping | → Muscle aches and tension |
| → Hypervigilance | → Difficulty concentrating |
| → Feeling emotionally numb | → Feelings of helplessness |
| → Anger and irritability | → Use of numbing activities (social media, tv, food, substances, etc.) |
| → Anxiety | |

RACIAL TRAUMA

“Racial trauma, or race-based stress, refers to the events of danger related to real or perceived experience of racial discrimination” (Comas-Diaz, Hall & Neville, 2019)

Racial Trauma occurs through experiences of microaggressions and discrimination that affects every aspect of our being! Research shows that racism can lead to anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, chronic stress, chronic fatigue, bodily inflammation, internalized racism and symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder.

“I call racism “the multifaceted abuser” because it has emotional, physical, mental and spiritual effects on our community. Research shows that racism can lead to anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, chronic stress, chronic fatigue, bodily inflammation, internalized racism and symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder. This is called racial trauma.”

(The Four Bodies: A holistic Toolkit for Coping with Racial Trauma,
by Jacquelyn Iyamah Ogorchukwu)



MANAGING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

THE ABCS OF ADDRESSING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

AWARENESS

Being attuned to one's needs, limits, emotions and resources. Self-reflection-noticing how am I doing right now? What am I feeling? Tune into our signals. Heed all levels of awareness and sources of information, cognitive, intuitive and somatic. Practice mindfulness and acceptance.

BALANCE

Maintaining balance among activities, especially work, play and rest. Develop and maintain activities outside of work. Inner balance allow attention to all aspects of oneself. Trying to take some time for ourselves each day.

CONNECTION

Connection with oneself, family, friends, communities, and to something larger. Connecting with colleagues and supervisor. These connections can offset isolation and increase validation and hope. Connection and communication with others can help breaks the silence of the things we are witnessing in the work.

(Adapted from-Trauma-informed: The Trauma Toolkit, Klinik Community Health Centre)

MANAGING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Self-Awareness, starts with recognizing that we are changed by our work

Set Boundaries, just as we encourage those we work with to find ways to care for themselves, as providers it matters that we also seek ways to begin actively caring for ourselves **within the work day**

Self-Care, focus on practices to attend to your physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well- being

Seek Support, create space to have conversations with colleagues, supervisors and when needed, a therapist about psychological safety

Work/life balance, where possible, schedule time away from work to give yourself a mental break from triggering situation



PHOTO BY KAMPUS PRODUCTION

COLLECTIVE CARE STRATEGIES

“No one should be isolated in their experience of grief, trauma or mental health at work”

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF CARE AT WORK

- Integrate worker wellness practices that addresses psychological safety at work
- Provide resources beyond Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to support personal and professional wellbeing
- Create worker wellness committees to develop interventions appropriate for your work environment
- Create formal and informal structures that supports workers to speak about the impact of the pain of working on the frontline
- Provide ongoing education and training opportunities to give everyone the same language around mental health and taking care of each other
- Promote work/life balance
- Develop worker wellness policies and practices to address the current reality workers are facing

IMPACT DEBRIEFING MATTERS

- Impact Debriefing is about **connection** and supporting workers to come back into balance
- Impact Debriefing reduces isolation by offering a space for support and validation
- Impact Debriefing is building a practice of **workers coming together** to talk about the impact of the work
- Impact Debriefing focuses on **the impact** of what happened on workers, it is not a space to fix or problem solve issues related to the incidents
- Being encouraged and supported to talk about experiences at work matters!

This activity can be used to support Collective Care conversations in teams:

1. The work-related stressors and traumatic event(s) most present with me today are...
2. The conversation I've been carrying around in my head/ heart that I have not been able to have with others is...
3. When I am dealing with loss and other work-related stressors, this is what others might notice about me in the workplace...
4. When I am under a lot of stress as a result of loss and other stressors at work, what I need from others is....., what I don't need from others is.....

// VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND SELF-CARE TOOLKIT

SELF-CARE & COLLECTIVE CARE

SELF-CARE

- **Self-care** is a personal choice
- **Self-care** are the things we do to help restore ourselves
- **Self-care** is physical care, eating healthy, drinking lots of water, getting plenty of exercise and rest
- **Self-care** is emotional care that includes setting boundaries and surrounding yourself with positive people and positivity
- **Self-care** is mental care, attending to our inner experiences and supports personal and professional development
- **Self-care** requires self-trust to do what we know what is best for us
- **Self-care** requires knowing when to reach out for support from a counsellor or therapist
- **Self-care** requires setting realistic goals and prioritizing to us hold steady
- **Self-care** requires slowing down, making space to relax, rest and nourish ourselves

MENTAL WELLNESS AT WORK

- Making time for mental breaks in the work day
- Giving ourselves '**permission to pause**'
- Engaging in activities that allow us to take a step back, to unwind and recharge mentally (deep breathing, humming, walking, journaling, or self-acupressure)
- Staying involved and talking with those who understand the reality of the work

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WHEN REACTING TO STRESS

- PAUSE
- BREATHE
- Take a moment to check in with yourself
- Ask-what's going on here?
(stress relief starts with knowing what is happening in our body)
- Become aware of people and situations that trigger emotional response
- Be gentle and compassionate with ourselves
- Being in a calm body gives us time to think things through

“We are stronger, faster and wiser when we are in a calm body”
(Dr. Peter Lavine)

SELF-AWARENESS IS THE COMPETENCY

- The first step in mastering our lives is cultivating the practice of checking in with ourselves before doing anything
- Self-Awareness involves **‘turning our gaze inward’** to observe where we're putting our energy
- **Being present** with ourselves provide us with a clear understanding of ourselves, our thoughts, emotions, strengths, and motivations
- Being self-aware is key to knowing when we are out of balance so we can take steps to **‘reset’**

Resilience in the workplace starts with knowing and honouring ourselves, before it ripples out to our relationship with others!

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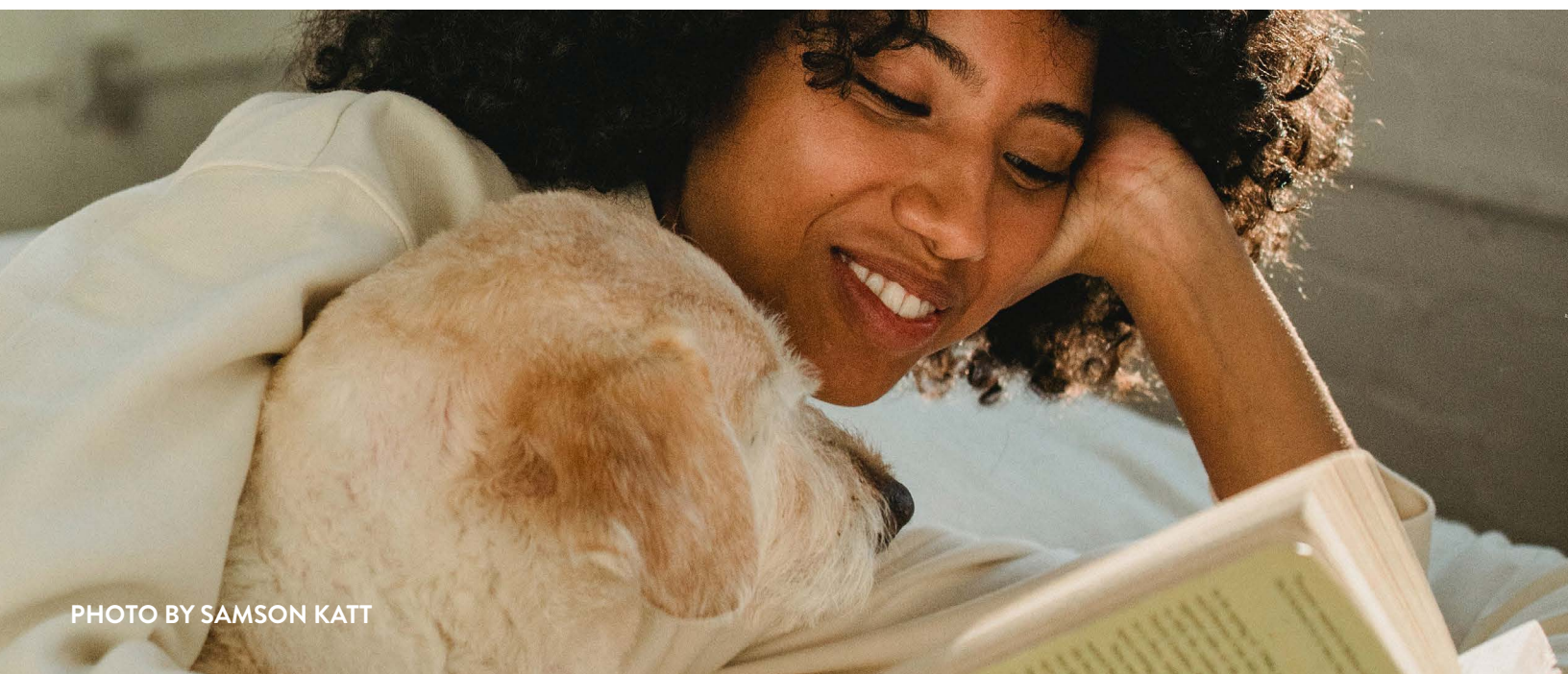
RESILIENT COPING STRATEGIES

- Having on-going and consistent self-care
- Boundary setting
- Making time for quiet reflection
- Examining what in our work and life experiences are causing us to abandon ourselves
- Keeping our priorities in focus in the face of our personal and work demands
- Building social supports and relating with those who understand the reality of working in these extraordinary times

CONSIDER A DIGITAL DETOX AS A SELF-CARE STRATEGY

The physical and mental strain from too much screen time, virtual meetings, responding to emails, text messages, and the constant bombardment of stories and images popping up on our social media, are added mental stressors in the work day.

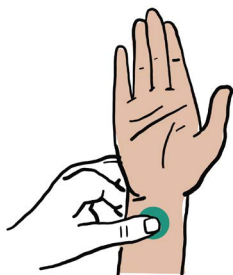
- Resist checking your device for the first 30 minutes after waking
- Cut off screen time 30 minutes to an hour before bed
- Consider doing a digital fast and give up all digital devices for a short period of time such as a day
- Consider a social media detox to restrict or eliminate access to one of your platforms



TOOLS FOR SUPPORT & STABILITY

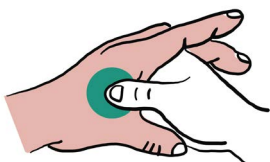
ACUPRESSURE AS A SELF-CARE STRATEGY

Self-acupressure is an accessible tool, right at our finger tips, that can be used to release tension and increase energy flow to promote on the spot relaxation at work.



WRIST POINT

Is useful to get relief from anxiety and fear. This Acupressure Wrist Point is situated on the fold of the wrist in line with the pinky finger. **Applying mild pressure on Wrist Point every day** will help to heal fearfulness, emotional stress, relieve tension, anxiety and improve memory.



UNION VALLEY

This point is located in the webbing between the thumb and the index finger. Stimulating this point helps in reducing muscle tension and relieving stress.



THREE MILE POINT

This acupressure point is a reset button for our nervous system. With stress being practically epidemic, this point can be used to bring the body back to relaxation following a chronic stress response.



**“Brake,
Pull over,
and Breathe!”**

Inhaling slow deep breaths through the mouth and exhaling slowly through the nose will help the nervous system to:

- Calm the mind
- Calm the body
- Decrease heart rate
- Clear emotional stress and anxiety

SUMMARY

Fostering worker wellbeing is vital to ensuring continued delivery of care and support for the communities' frontline workers are serving. However, the need for responsive strategies that addresses the mental health and wellness needs of workers is critical to fostering a culture of care in the work environment.

We hope this toolkit will help support workplace conversations about managing vicarious trauma at work.

We hope this toolkit will help frontline workers resist the pull of 'grind culture' (that push to keep going and keep doing at all cost), and begin to prioritize pausing to take space to speak about the pain and overwhelm from stressors and challenges prevalent in the work in these times of heightened suffering, loss and grief.

We hope organizations will continue seeking ways to develop worker well-being resources that are focused on strengthening individual and collective capacity of workers to respond to the mental and emotional impact of traumatic occurrences at work!

“In truth, our experiences are real, our trauma is real, and the healing we deserve is real” (Jacquelyn Iyamah Ogorchukwu)

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

[When Helping Hurts-Understanding The Impact of Vicarious trauma \(CAMH\)](#)

[The Impact Debriefing Guide, The AIDS Bereavement and Resiliency Program of Ontario](#)

Trauma-informed-The Trauma Toolkit, Klinik Community Health Centre

[When Grief Comes to Work by ABRPO](#)

Coping Strategies for Racial Trauma with Jacquelyn Ogorchukwu Iyamah

[4 Key Dimensions of Self-Care](#)

[Acupressure for relaxation](#)

GLOW Initiative, Grief, Loss and Wellness

[Trauma and Healing](#)

[Big 'T' vs. Little 't' Trauma](#)



