

COPING WITH VICARIOUS GRIEF



What is Vicarious Grief?

Vicarious grief ("VG") refers to the grief experienced in response to someone else's loss.*

What are the symptoms of VG?

Although vicarious grief has symptoms similar to personal grief, it is not identical. It also shares characteristics with secondary trauma.

The following reactions could occur:

- weeping,
- feelings of emptiness and heaviness,
- problems with sleep and appetite,
- depressive mood,
- irritability/anxiety,
- exhaustion,
- insomnia,
- joint/muscular pain,
- stomach ache/gastritis.

Types of VG

There are two types of VG:

1. The vicarious griever identifies with what it must be like for the bereaved; and
2. The vicarious griever not only empathizes with the bereaved but also mourns their own personal losses.

Influences of Vicarious Grief Reactions

Certain factors influence the way in which a person struggling with VG is impacted:

1. The physical, psychological, and social distance between the vicarious griever and the bereaved;
2. The way in which the vicarious griever identifies with the bereaved and/or the situation;
3. The unique way in which the vicarious griever processes empathy and sympathy; and
4. The way in which each situation/incident is interpreted by the griever—often influenced by perceptions of unpredictability and uncontrollability (e.g., deaths caused by "freak" accidents).

Vicarious Grief in Helping Professions

- Those who routinely witness the aftermath of tragedy are immersed in environments where bereavement is ever-present. Like doctors, psychologists, nurses, firefighters, law enforcement officers, and emergency responders, these individuals are particularly susceptible to vicarious grief.
- The intensity of VG can be heightened by repeated exposure to stories of loss that resonate personally, as well as by absorbing a form of secondary trauma from ongoing interactions with grieving individuals.
- Some who witness tragedy may also face physical demands in their roles, such as the strenuous tasks associated with responding to death scenes or assisting with memorial preparations.
- These individuals often become entwined in mourning rituals, ceremonies, or commemorative events, deepening their emotional connection to the grief surrounding the losses.



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- Navigating diverse cultural beliefs, practices, and expectations regarding death and bereavement adds additional layers of emotional and psychological strain.
- Social isolation may develop as many find it difficult to discuss the emotional complexities of their work in casual settings due to stigma, misunderstanding, or the sensitive nature of the experiences they witness.
- As a result, individuals who frequently witness tragedy might contend with:
 - physical and psychological challenges;
 - lack of motivation, dissatisfaction, burnout, absenteeism;
 - counterproductive work behaviors,
 - the risk of developing addictions;
 - negative spillover effects on work–family relations, including emotional withdrawal; and
 - significant consequences for personal and family life.

2. **Spiritual and Faith-Based Support:**

Reflect on and deepen spiritual beliefs or practices that offer comfort and resilience.

3. **Engage in Restorative Activities:**

Incorporate activities that foster relaxation and pleasure, such as reading, creative expression, journaling, or watching uplifting content.

4. **Practice Comprehensive Self-Care:** Prioritize exercise, a balanced diet, sufficient sleep, laughter, music, setting healthy boundaries, and moderating caffeine intake.

5. **Seek Positive Social Support:** Spend meaningful time with supportive and positive family members and friends.

Strategies to Recover from Vicarious Grief

To buffer the psychological impact of grief, individuals can engage in acts of kindness toward the bereaved, promoting positive physiological changes linked with happiness and demonstrating to peers the ongoing presence of compassion and hope.

1. **Reframe Experiences:** View the passing of others as a reminder of life's preciousness. Focus on strengthening personal relationships, passions, and establishing new goals—leading to "Vicarious Posttraumatic Positive Growth" ("VPTG").

Resources:

- [*https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9841206/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9841206/)
- [**https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6438950/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6438950/)



For more information, resources or support on this topic...

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