

COVID-19 & BIRTH TRAUMA

VICARIOUS TRAUMA - THE COST OF CARING



Find more information and resources visit
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ABTA wishes to thank all health professionals working to care for those affected by this pandemic including those who are helping women to birth safely during this time.

1 How to go about seeking help

Check on your abcs (Awareness, Balance and Connection).

A

AWARENESS

It is vital to be aware of what is happening in you physically and emotionally. Have you had enough sleep? Are you rundown? Are your children sick? Have you been fighting with your partner? Shouting at the children or your staff?

B

BALANCE

Have you been able to balance your personal needs with the demands of work, and ensuring the very demanding work is balanced with less challenging tasks? Do you stop working after a few hours and check in with yourself or just keep going until you're exhausted? Are you able to take regular breaks?

C

CONNECTION

Are you connecting with others as much as ever and are you feeling the same level of anticipation before and satisfaction after? Respecting our own need for community and connection allows us to be cared for when necessary, which allows us to keep caring for others.

2 Mental Wellbeing Maintenance

Here are a few helpful tips to maintain mental health:

Connection

Connection is absolutely key. Consider opportunities to set up peer-to-peer support within your team if that is not already in place. Team social occasions need to be organised.

Sharing

Ensure that there is a mental health professional available to your team who can provide both ad hoc (debrief) and regular, scheduled reflection sessions where you can unload and discuss your concerns in a confidential environment.

Solidarity

Perhaps you can think of small acts of collective care you could make to look after one another right now.

Support your mental health now

Rather than processing what is an incredibly challenging situation, what can you do to support your mental wellbeing in the here and now? This might include journaling, speaking to loved ones, brief meditation – anything which gives you a small chance to rest and reset.

Escape

Make sure to take time for yourself unrelated to work – physically or mentally. Read books, listen to podcasts (note; not related to trauma), talk to friends about things other than work, take up Tai-Chi or yoga or exercise with a friend - (tennis, golf, sailing, kayaking). Mindfulness apps, Mood tracking apps like woebot are a good way to monitor your mood over time to see if this is changing subtly, beneath your consciousness.

Rest

Allow yourself to do things with no expectation (non-goal directed activity). Go for a walk every day with no destination, nap during the day, sip a cup of tea mindfully, have a bath, a massage, do some casual gardening.

Play

Look at your current activities and decide which are nurturing and which are depleting e.g., reading to your children might feel nurturing, while cleaning may not feel nurturing. Be sure to do more of the nurturing activities than depleting ones.

Be honest

Sometimes people helping others feel they must meet every need presented. If you start feeling dread, discomfort, despair or annoyance this needs to be respected as a sign that you may start to be experiencing trauma.

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Use evidence-based and reliable resources

In the information overload try and not get overwhelmed by focusing on evidence-based and reliable resources:

Local state/territory health department's website

www.health.gov.au

AHPRA and National Board support

www.ahpra.gov.au/News/COVID-19.aspx

RANZCOG new guidelines and monitoring changes on maternity services

ranzocg.edu.au/statements-guidelines/covid-19-statement

Lifeline has compiled useful tips, advice and links to articles that can be helpful in dealing with the effects of the pandemic:

lifeline.org.au/get-help/topics/mental-health-and-wellbeing-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak

4

Support and a helping hand

Peer supervision

The process of reflection on your experience in a safe and respectful way can help us process and contextualise the discomfort experienced

ABTA Peer2Peer Chat service

Our Peer Mentors support women, families and health professionals who have experienced birth-related trauma.

Your Peer Support network

Peer support through online forums may normalise your experience.

Speak to your GP

Consider speaking to your GP about a Mental Health Care Plan to allow you to speak to a specialist about your experience.

Recommended organisations / websites



RUOKAY
work resources
ruok.org.au/work



coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au



nmsupport.org.au



crana.org.au/resources/covid-19/self-care



midwives.org.au/support-line-midwives

For more information visit us online or on social media



facebook.com/birthtrauma.org.au



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“Many professionals are morally conflicted, feeling incredibly torn by the decisions they’re being asked to make, and worried about returning home in fear that they might spread the virus to their loved ones.” Dr Jan Smith, Clinical Lead at Make Birth Better.

COVID-19 is posing unprecedented challenges to the health system, health practitioners and the wider community. We understand the enormous amounts of pressure you’re under. We sincerely thank our doctors, nurses and midwives for their continuing commitment and care for people. We know our regulatory approach must be modified to support you in these exceptional circumstances.

What is vicarious trauma?

Vicarious trauma is a process of adverse change that occurs over time to people through repeated exposure to (witnessing or hearing about) other people’s suffering and needs. It is the cumulative effect of repeated contact with survivors of traumatic events, and the feeling of responsibility for, or commitment to, providing help.

With 1 in 3 Australian women identifying their birth as traumatic¹, maternity care providers are at risk of Vicarious trauma.

The greater the exposure to traumatic events, the greater the risk of vicarious trauma. It can occur in anyone who works or interacts with people in pain, those in desperate situations or needing ongoing support after experiencing traumatic events. This includes health and related professionals (such as paramedics), volunteers and carers.

The process has two parts: it is both a consequence of caring about others and their suffering AND feeling a need and/or responsibility to help them. It includes empathy, which is relating to and understanding others experiences and their responses in a compassionate and thoughtful way, but the empathy is gradually lost as the effects accumulate.

There is a sense of commitment to the people being served and a determination to help ease their suffering, but when the helper feels they are no longer able to meet that need, they can begin to feel overwhelmed, burdened, resentful and start to lose hope. They may build new defences against experiencing the pain of the other.

This is where effective, kind and empathetic communication can be lost at a time when it is needed most.

Your role during COVID-19

We know that during this time you may experience any number of symptoms relating to vicarious trauma. As with any trauma or grief, signs and symptoms can manifest in a multitude of ways.

It’s important that as a healthcare worker / professional that your self-care regimens and practices put you as a priority, in order to continue to provide the valuable supports structures and services that your patients and community need.

Signs and Symptoms

- Feeling disconnected or bad about yourself – it can feel like you’re playing a part in a play and not being “in” your life
- Personality changes – feeling mean or cynical
- Misplaced guilt at your own good fortune
- Feeling like your emotions are out of control
- Relationship problems
- Physical issues
 - fatigue
 - aches and pains
 - falling ill more often
 - being more clumsy
- Difficulty making good decisions
- A feeling of disconnection from what is important and a loss of meaning and hope in life
- Difficulty managing boundaries – taking on too much, feeling responsible for things that are not your responsibility, taking on other people’s problems as your own
- Avoiding social events
- Commencing or increasing alcohol or other substance use (e.g. taking up smoking)

Reference: 1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11251488>. Accessed April 2020.

